

Border Crossings

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IT HAPPENED AGAIN AS I WAS WALKING through the New Hampshire woods with a woman I knew only slightly. We had been chatting amiably when the words "Mormon feminist" escaped my mouth. From the expression on her face, I knew exactly what she was going to say.

"Mormon feminist! That sounds like an oxymoron!"

I bristled, though I didn't mean to, annoyed at having to explain myself once again.

Yes, I am an active, believing Mormon. I was baptized at the age of eight, graduated from seminary, and married in the Salt Lake temple. For thirty-five years I have tried to remain true to my temple covenants, including the one about consecrating time and talents to the church. I have taught early morning seminary, written road shows, edited the stake newsletter, and picked apples, plums, peaches, and pears at the stake welfare farm. With my husband, I recently completed my third stint as Gospel Doctrine teacher in our ward.

And, yes, I am a feminist. I deplore teachings, policies, or attitudes that deny women their full stature as human beings, and I have tried to act on that conviction in my personal and professional life. I have written two books and more than a dozen articles in women's history. I give money to the day care coalition in my town and the women's political caucus in my state. I helped draft my university's non-sexist language policy.

I am quite aware that some people consider these commitments incompatible. A couple of years ago, a member of the Women's Commission at my university, learning that I was Mormon, said in astonishment, "I am surprised your church hasn't thrown you out long ago."

"Thrown me out!" I gasped. "I'm a pillar of my congregation." The very same day I was queried by an LDS acquaintance I had not seen for several years. Hearing about my awards for feminist scholarship, she asked earnestly, "Do you go to church? Do you bear your testimony?" I groaned and told her, tongue in cheek, that I was an agnostic Gospel Doctrine teacher.

Perhaps my disposition to stand apart is genetic. Elsewhere I have

written about my Thatcher pioneers who regularly disagreed with church authorities. I have said less about my maternal ancestors, the Siddoways. In my mother's home town, I am told, there are still three ways of doing things—the right way, the wrong way, and the Siddoway. Graduate school compounded what family inheritance and eight years of high school and college debate began. I am afraid I fit the definition of an intellectual as “a person who thinks otherwise.” Hence when I began this essay more than a year ago, I entitled it “Confessions of an OxyMormon.” According to my dictionary, the prefix *oxy* means, “sharp, keen, acute, pungent, acid,” not a bad description for one given to critical thinking. I admit to preferring vinegar to honey, being less interested in catching flies than in rousing the faint.

Yet I am not so sure I want to admit to all the implications of the epithet. Acid can burn as well as cleanse, and in my dictionary, the word “keen” slides along an enticing but slippery lexical path from “wise, learned, clever, and brave” to “proud, forward, and insolent.” Against such dangers my Mormonism buzzes: “O the vainness, and the frailties, and the foolishness of men! When they are learned they think they are wise, and they hearken not unto the counsel of God” (2 Ne. 9:28). As an intellectual I am forced to question my questioning. As a Latter-day Saint I acknowledge my foolishness.

Last winter the *Boston Globe* ran a story on *Exponent II* under the headline “Challenging the Mormon Church.” The author, free-lance writer Suzanne Gordon, had worked hard on her essay, interviewing members and non-members, scholars and activists, and attending at least one meeting of the newspaper staff. “To an outsider,” she confessed, “the very act of understanding these women requires a minicourse in cross-cultural studies.” Building on interviews with two non-LDS historians, she concluded that the editors and writers of *Exponent II* were not only risking censure in this world but salvation in the afterlife. In the context of Mormon theology, she concluded, “any talk about a female identity outside of the family, or critical consideration of the problems of family life, can be taken as a fundamental challenge to the very foundation of Mormonism itself.”¹ My youngest son, a man of quiet good sense who lives in a converted warehouse in the heart of bohemian Boston, said that while he enjoyed the article, he thought the author “exaggerated the rebellion.” He was amused that the sturdy Mormon mother he knew, a habitual reader of scriptures and monitor of hair length, could be seen as shaking the foundations of the church.²

1. Suzanne Gordon, *Boston Globe*, 25 Mar. 1993, reprinted in *Exponent II* 17 (4): 5-7.

2. *Ibid.*, 6.

He is right. I am not an oxyMormon. I am a Mormon. And a feminist. As a daughter of God, I claim the right to all my gifts. I am a mother, an intellectual, a skeptic, a believer, a crafter of cookies and words. I am not a Jack (or a Jill) in one box, ready to jump when the button is pushed.

Perhaps I am comfortable wearing the feminist label because as a Latter-day Saint living in the east I have had so much practice being an oddball. Shortly after we moved to Massachusetts in 1960, I succumbed to the entreaties of the missionaries in our ward and agreed to help them with a telephone survey. We were to ask each person on our list the Golden Questions: What do you know about the Mormon church? Would you like to know more? One man silenced me by responding, "I don't know a thing about the Mormon church, but I shall look it up in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* immediately." His smug tolerance put me in my place—in the Ms, somewhere between moonbeam and moron.

I doubt his encyclopedia had an entry for feminism. Although the word was in common use in the United States between 1895 and 1930, it fell out of fashion before World War II, not to be revived again until the 1970s. My *Compact Oxford English Dictionary*, copyright 1971, defines feminism as "The qualities of females." Until 1977, the index to *The Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* cross-referenced the word under "Woman—social and moral questions." It is really rather startling to think that in July 1974 a group of Massachusetts housewives could launch a quarterly newspaper, *Exponent II*, "on the dual platforms of Mormonism and Feminism." We did not think we had committed an oxymoron.

Today the computerized catalog at the University of New Hampshire library lists 777 books under the subject entry "Feminism." Obviously, any movement as large, as fast growing, and as complex as this one cannot be reduced to a simple definition. When I hear people rail against feminists I always wonder who they mean. Scholars have differentiated among radical feminism, liberal feminism, Marxist feminism, Christian feminism, lesbian feminism, and more. Pushing the concept back in time, they have coined terms like domestic feminism, social feminism, material feminism, relational feminism, and proto-feminism.³ Long before there was an organized women's rights movement, there were women who struggled against arbitrary limits on their humanity. Though my dictionary doesn't have a definition for feminism as we know it, it does have an entry for bluestock-

3. For a useful discussion of the historical origins of the term feminism, see Nancy F. Cott, "What's in a Name? The Limits of 'Social Feminism': or, Expanding the Vocabulary of Women's History," *Journal of American History* 76 (1989): 809-29. Although I agree with Cott's plea for an expanded vocabulary for female activism, I can think of no substitute for "feminism" when used in a broader context.

ing, a term coined about 1750 and applied “sneeringly to any woman showing a taste for learning.”

When I say that I am a feminist, I identify with women across the centuries who have had the courage to claim their own gifts. Theologically, I don't have much in common with the Puritan poet Anne Bradstreet, but having been raised in a culture that simultaneously nurtures and mistrusts female achievement, I can identify with her words:

I am obnoxious to each carping tongue
Who says my hand a needle better fits. . . .
For such despite they cast in female wits;
If what I do prove well, it won't advance,
They'll say it's stolen, or else it was by chance.⁴

There was no organized women's rights movement in seventeenth-century Massachusetts, but there was something like feminism.

As a Mormon, I embrace ideals of equality and a critique of power that also shaped early feminism. Abigail Adams's “all Men would be tyrants if they could”⁵ is not far removed from Joseph Smith's “We have learned by sad experience that it is the nature and disposition of almost all men as soon as they get a little authority, as they suppose, they will immediately begin to exercise unrighteous dominion” (D&C 121:39). Mormonism rejects the Calvinist notion of predestination as well as the monarchical notion of a great chain of being in which each person is subordinate to the one above. Listen to Lehi: “And because that they are redeemed from the fall they have become free forever, knowing good from evil; to act for themselves and not to be acted upon” (2 Ne. 3:26). Lehi's formulation is surprisingly close to the modern distinction between subject and object. That each person be free to think, speak, and act for herself is both a feminist and a Mormon dream. As a Latter-day Saint, I say with Mary Wolstonecraft, “Let not men then in the pride of power, use the same arguments that tyrannic kings and venal ministers have used and fallaciously assert that women ought to be subjected because she had always been so.”⁶

Yet my commitment to the Church of Jesus Christ pushes me beyond a mere concern for “rights.” As a feminist I know that structures matter, that formal authority makes a difference in the way people think as well as behave, that institutional arrangements can lock in prejudice, yet I also

4. Anne Bradstreet, “The Prologue,” *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women*, ed. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (New York: W.W. Norton, 1985), 62.

5. Abigail Adams to John Adams, 31 Mar. 1776, in *The Feminist Papers*, ed. Alice S. Rossi (New York: Bantam Books, 1973), 10.

6. From *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, excerpted in *Feminist Papers*, 58.

know that legal protection is hollow without spiritual transformation and that the right spirit can transform a seemingly repressive system. My daily experience as a Latter-day Saint confirms the words of Margaret Fuller, a nineteenth-century feminist and contemporary of Joseph Smith: "Were thought and feeling once so far elevated that Man should esteem himself the brother and friend, but nowise the lord and tutor, of Woman,—were he really bound with her in equal worship,—arrangements as to function and employment would be of no consequence."⁷ I have tasted equal worship in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Unfortunately, I have also observed the smug condescension of men who believe they have been called as lord and tutor. Against such behavior I assert both my Mormonism and my feminism.

To claim multiple identities is to assert the insufficiency of any one label, including Mormonism. According to my *Compact Oxford English Dictionary*, an oxymoron is not simply a self-contradictory expression like "freezing heat" or "swampy desert." It is a rhetorical figure in which contradictory or incongruous terms are intentionally joined in order to complicate or enlarge meaning. Although in current usage the word is "often loosely or erroneously used as if merely a contradiction in terms," a true oxymoron is "an expression in its superficial or literal meaning self-contradictory or absurd, but involving a point." The phrase "Mormon feminist" can work that way. Those who assume Mormonism is inherently hostile to women or, conversely, that feminism undermines faith, sniff at the phrase. But when confronted with a real person claiming to be both things at once, they are forced to reconsider their assumptions. Feminism may be larger than they imagined and Mormonism more flexible.

As biologist Stephen Jay Gould has written, "We must categorize and simplify in order to comprehend. But the reduction of complexity entails a great danger, since the line between enlightening epitome and vulgarized distortion is so fine."⁸ The *Boston Globe* crossed that line when it described the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as "quintessentially misogynist."⁹ But when anxious church leaders denounce feminists they compound the distortion. Each group reduces the other to its own worst nightmare, and the war is on. In such a climate it is tempting to run for shelter, saying less about feminism among Mormons and less about Mormonism everywhere else. But a silence based on fear is no solution. As long

7. *Feminist Papers*, 164.

8. "Triumph of a Naturalist," *New York Review of Books*, 19 Mar. 1984, 58-71, quoted in Cynthia Fuchs Epstein, *Deceptive Distinctions: Sex, Gender, and the Social Order* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), frontispiece.

9. Suzanne Gordon, "Herstory in the Making," *Boston Globe Magazine*, 31 Jan. 1993, reprinted in *Exponent II* 17 (4): 4.

as the issues are there, unacknowledged and unresolved, the anger and hostility will remain. I think it is better to gently but consistently tell the truth. I am a Mormon and a feminist.

I remember as a teenager standing up in my ward in Sugar City, Idaho, to repeat the MIA theme of the year: "Let no man despise thy youth: but be thou as example of the believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity" (1 Tim. 4:12). I am grateful for a religious education that taught me how to be different, though I had no idea it would sometimes make me feel like a stranger among saints. In my generation, being an example of the believers had a lot to do with the Word of Wisdom. In Sunday school and MIA we learned about the Mormon lad who resisted a proffered cup of coffee or a drink only to be rewarded with a promotion. (Nobody told us the promotion might be the biggest danger of all!) Fortunately, in the old seminary room above the Sugar City Theater, a mandolin-playing teacher named Ken Brown taught a more complex ethic. Gently and with humor, he led us through the New Testament, helping us to see the dangers in the Pharisees' attempt to separate themselves from the ungodly. The harder they tried to behave as "Abraham's children," the less they were capable of receiving the Messiah when he came.

A few years ago I attended an invitational conference in U.S. women's history. The organizers, fully committed to diversity, had gone out of their way to include women from large and small colleges, from every part of the United States, and from many minority groups. When one scholar expressed surprise that no one from BYU had been invited, a well-known nineteenth-century historian responded, "Oh, we don't want them!" Orthodoxy feels the same wherever it is found. Certainly there is a need for boundaries, for rigorous defense of ideas and ideals that matter, but defenders of every faith too often violate their own ideals in the very act of defending them. The gospel of Jesus Christ teaches us that light falls across borders, that the sun in its revolutions brightens both sides of a wall, spilling through the spaces in our fences. Mormon intellectuals should not forget that Jesus gathered his disciples from among sinners, publicans, *and* pharisees, even zealous pharisees like Paul, a man who knew what it meant to live in a multi-cultural world. To the saints at Ephesus, Paul wrote: "For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us" (Eph. 2:14).

Recently I assigned Tzvetan Todorov's *The Conquest of America* to my students in early American history. Reading it again I found personal meaning in the closing section which relates the story of the Spanish conquest to the problems of pluralism in our times. In Todorov's view, one of the few Spaniards who was able to transcend the brutality and condescension that characterized early Spanish treatment of the Indians was Cabeza de Vaca, an explorer who spent eight years lost in the interior of

North America. It wasn't only that Cabeza had experienced both cultures from within, it was that after his exile he never fully belonged to either. Without becoming an Indian, he "was no longer quite a Spaniard." For Todorov, Cabeza illuminates the mysterious words of Hugh St. Victor: "The man who finds his country sweet is only a raw beginner; the man for whom each country is as his own is already strong; but only the man for whom the whole world is as a foreign country is perfect." Todorov's insight helped me to reassess the dislocations in my own life. I have sometimes felt like a woman without a country. Perhaps the experience of "otherness" can be a source of strength. We are all prisoners of our culture, bound not by visible laws but by a net of assumptions and prejudices we cannot see. In the space between competing identities, I seek Lehi's freedom.

I do not apologize for what I am—an intellectual who reveres the scriptures; a Sunbeam teacher who would sooner write than eat; a transplanted westerner at home in the east. I can no more deny my religious identity than I can divest myself of my Thatcher freckles or my Rocky Mountain accent. Nor would I discard my feminist values. The women's movement has refreshed my life like the "sea change" that sometimes hits my town in those steamy, grey days so common on the east coast in mid-summer. At such moments a blue, almost Western, sky breaks through the haze.