The Provo Tabernacle: My Strange and Lonely Place

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My grandmother knew where people went when they died. I feel less certain, though my continual return to her faith is a necessary part of me, and the humility at the core of Christianity argues for a return. The recent fire, destruction, and transformation of the Provo Tabernacle as a temple have been both a personal allegory as well as a symbol for the growing LDS Church. For this Provo girl, the tabernacle is a historic and paradoxical representation of the tension that exists between the past and the present, between orthodoxy and belief.

Truthfully, the Provo Tabernacle was an old building, falling apart. It was uncomfortable to sit and look sideways in the slanting balcony seats with no legroom, and it was never the right temperature in the summer or the winter. But it was also beautiful. The choice to preserve the exterior architecture and its place as the center of Provo is wise and admirable. To make it into a sacred structure after the tragic fire and not tear it down honors its history. But it is also a loss. Something is gained, but something very important is lost.

The tabernacle was built in 1883 next to another building, built in 1861 that was too small for its purpose of holding large church meetings. This type of building was somewhat typical of early Utah pioneer communities. It was paid for and built by the few Mormons who had only begun building a community in Provo some fifteen years earlier. This group of outliers, radical religious refugees from the established American territory, was incredibly poor, faithful, and interested in gaining respectability both for themselves and their religion. When they hardly had a school or an established public building, they spent $100,000 on the tabernacle.

It was meant not only as a gesture of devotion but also as a bid for legitimacy. A tabernacle does not have the sacred nature of a temple and indeed, at that time, the role of the temple was very different than it is today. Temples were not attended regularly as a form of worship but were meant for sacred events throughout a lifetime. Ideas of "faithfulness" and "activity" and "belief" were vastly different than they are today. The tabernacle reflected those differences in its use and construction.

The tabernacle was the proud and beautiful statement of a generation gone but still speaking, and its message was Mormon. It anchored the 1970s Provo where I wandered. The death of my mother in early life left me with a tendency to look backward. Maybe I was attracted to old buildings to get a glimpse of her. The tabernacle's anachronism excited me—Gothic windows and black conical roofs. Climbing its strangely narrow, winding staircases and smelling its aging plaster and wooden pews was time travel. It accompanied me when I walked to the post office or to the Paramount or to the corner drugstore and when I cut across its picnic grass to Woolworth's for something I'd saved up for. The same faithful sycamores that lined the path from my grandma's house were there. *Because* it was out of its time, I loved it.

Before the grounds of the new temple could be built, the foundation of the older, smaller tabernacle to the north was excavated. The enthusiasm for this project illustrates our interest in traces of those who have gone before. I visited the Brigham Young University Office of Public Archeology and took photos of the objects they had found: a ring, toy trinkets, bobby pins, nails, bottles, coins, and the rusted skeleton of a tricycle pulled out of a well. The materiality of archeology is deceptive. On the one hand, it produces objects that are present. LDS preservation specialist Dr. Benjamin Pykles describes it this way: "The tangibility of the object is so appealing. [It] connects us. The real and the authentic lend credence to our stories."[1] On the other hand, these objects are taken out of a grave and, like the trike I photographed, refer starkly to their owner's absence.

Similarly, the few objects that I have from my mother provide precious traces of her. They are a green and blue tulle dance cos-

tume sewn by her, a clay plate she made for her parents with the words "Love Mary Le" written on the back, and a fabric quiet-book, also sewn by her, for my brother and me; "Tracy" is stitched in a red diagonal on the front and "Kimberly" on the back. Each page has an ingenious activity for our little hands; there is an orange and black shoe with a lace for tying on the first page, multicolored buckles on the next, a little green coat with wooden buttons, and an orange gingerbread man with a zipper. Finally, there is a tiny red mitten open at the bottom into which we could slip a hand. More than a material object, the book is evidence of her love.

Excavators at the site of the old tabernacle used brushes to carefully remove the last bits of dirt from the remains of an adjacent baptismal font built around 1875. It is framed by the foundation of the tiny baptistry, the smallest building pictured in old photographs of the complex. It stood very near the back of the old tabernacle where there was a vestry for changing clothes. If the excavation site was not already hallowed, the discovery of the font made it so. Baptism ritualizes one's commitment to live God's commandments. You walk down into water wearing white clothes that float and sway oddly against you. A short prayer is spoken and you are gently put under the water; time is suspended when you realize there is no sound and you are looking up at the surface from underneath. Then you are pulled up; a lot of quiet smiling follows, and a difficult exit with soaking clothes clinging. I don't remember my baptism at all, but it was documented with a white-bordered photo marked with the year "'71." My Uncle Kent baptized me; I lived with him for the two years before I was adopted at age nine by a BYU professor. There is quite a bit of plaid in the photo. I look pretty happy. I do remember the weight of hands on my head when my Grandpa Means confirmed me, and his deep voice. I haven't given much thought to what it must have felt like to him to be confirming this little girl who remained after his daughter had died. He was probably watching when I was lifted up out of the water to symbolize coming up out of the grave. Most of the time in the nineteenth century, people who got baptized did it in a river or a lake; this new baptistry would have offered more privacy and ceremony. Its discovery is significant because baptism is the first

in a series of ordinances that help a person move closer to God; the others are sacrament and temple marriage. Since two of the three ordinances have been performed on this piece of ground, the addition of a temple consummates the narrative. This is why Dr. Pykles referred to the area as "a cosmology of Mormon worship."[2] Paradoxically, for me, that infinite cosmology is comprehended in stone and soil.

Something unique about the tabernacle was that it was open to anyone who wished to attend. It accommodated all of us as, over the course of the twentieth century, the population changed, and it was subsequently claimed by all Provoans, Mormon or not. In the Historic Downtown Provo Oral History Project sponsored by BYU's Charles Redd Center, several participants express regret that the tabernacle could not have been saved; they reminisce about its many important public functions that brought disparate members of the community together. Stephen Allan Hales remembers fondly Catholic and interfaith services held in the old building; in 1996, when the St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Church building was deemed unsafe, Father Flegge led Christmas Eve services there. Community Arts coordinator Kathryn Allen speculates that many unprofitable programs such as the Mormon Youth Symphony and Chorus will cease to exist without the free venue that the tabernacle provided. Allen originated extremely popular events like *Messiah* sing-alongs, Monday night concerts, community music series, and early New Year's Eve concerts for older patrons that were all held in the tabernacle. Kelly McConkie Henriod writes, "[T]he Provo Tabernacle was also a place where school children sang, community members were honored in funerals, and people of various faiths met to pray. The Tabernacle was not only a grand building to behold, it was a grand place to come together."[3] John Bonnett says, "Since I'm not a participating Mormon, it made me sad that they decided to turn it into a temple. But I'm sure it will be beautiful."[4] I feel like Mr. Bonnett. I'm sad it will no longer be a place for all of us, regardless of faith. Such a place is needed.

It wasn't until the tabernacle was being changed into a temple that I realized how strongly I identified with its ability to bring all of us together: those of strong faith, those of broken faith, and

those with no faith. The Mormon/non-Mormon boundary is a large part of my world. My grandparents cherished and helped build the LDS faith and bequeathed it to their children as their most valuable possession. I was given a golden gift as a child. I was taught that I could know God for myself, that prayer and revelation were the means through which I could communicate with a higher being. This shaped me, and I have been seeking to communicate with God ever since. I felt regularly inclined to reach for God. The promise "and by the power of the Holy Ghost ye may know the truth of all things" resonated with me so completely that it is difficult to tell if it came from without or within. When I was fourteen years old, I left my Oak Hills home in the middle of the night and walked to the Provo Temple, where I slept for a while on a bench around the back, then got cold and headed home. The impression left on my soul by Joseph's quest for answers from God—"for how to act I did not know"—was indelible. This inclination, however, remained a searching; I never settled in and took God for granted. For me, to know God was usually to wrestle with the conditions of my existence. Once I stood in the predawn light near Dixon Jr. High and shouted an angry monologue at Cascade Mountain. I was demanding answers. I don't remember what I was angry about, but it was between God and me. As a young college student, I crossed out certain words in the Book of Mormon as I tried to reconcile them with Jungian thought, but I didn't stop reading it. I believe I came by both my faith and my questioning honestly; both grow right out of the circumstances of my upbringing. My family, like many, is an accidental conglomerate leaving me inherently divided and seeking reconciliation. Because some of their children couldn't or wouldn't receive the gift, the faith of my grandparents seems to have failed. But the faith of our fathers wasn't just a set of beliefs—it was a way of ordering the world, visible in the art they produced, the histories they wrote, their monuments, their trails, their songs, and their buildings. To separate myself from their faith seems impossible. I will miss the tabernacle because it gathered people from all sides, but its universal accessibility couldn't (and didn't try to) mend the division within me.

When I was just starting college at BYU, the mother, father, and two brothers of a friend of mine were killed in a car accident on the way to Vale, Colorado. Three coffins made a line in the tabernacle when I went to the funeral; her father was still fighting for his life in a hospital. I went by myself because I was terrified by what had happened. I didn't want to talk to anyone because there were no words for this. The image of the three coffins stretching the breadth of the tabernacle is unforgettable; it represented half of her family. My mother also died in a car accident. Seven years before her accident, she married my dad when she discovered she was pregnant. She later miscarried, but her determination kept them together. They had my brother and me before she died, and the family didn't survive without her. Months after the funeral for my friend's family when I saw her in a clothing store, I hid. A woman had spoken at the funeral about having seen my friend's mother in a singular way before her death; she felt she had been blessed with a heightened awareness of this person who was about to die. I still remember that elevated vision she spoke of; I remember her impressive confidence in the face of those three coffins. I remained caught between her great faith on the one hand and staggering loss on the other.

My mom spent her teenage years in the neighborhood east of downtown Provo. Her dad worked on the railroad. He carried a black, metal, round-topped lunch box and drove an oil-smelling truck I loved to ride in as long as I could keep out of the way of the long gear-shift. Deep gutters surrounded their lot that he dammed once a month to flood his lawn. Our bare feet slapped the water as we ran through it. His family had come to Utah from Texas years before. As Texans, they had been an important part of a small Mormon colony that was emptied out by the Great Depression. One day they piled themselves and their belongings into a big truck, *Grapes of Wrath*–style, and headed to Zion. My great-grandmother's disillusionment at being greeted by shining neon bar signs when they arrived in Salt Lake City is legendary. Grandpa joined the army and sent his $21 paycheck to his poor family each month. They were deeply hurt by the way they were treated as outsiders in Utah. As a teenager, I became aware of

a hierarchical tension between these different families of which I was a part; the tensions seemed to result from religion, money, and education. I was told my mother's strong will clashed with her father's: she, a progressive supporter of civil rights, and he, with the racial sensitivity of Archie Bunker. It's unfair, however, to judge him out of context. He had also been the victim of discrimination in Utah because of his poverty. His goal to be an officer in the service was frustrated because of his crooked teeth. He was an intelligent young man unable to get the education and opportunity he wanted. My grandmother was a nurse, and he was hurt by her enthusiastic admiration of doctors. I sense my mother was similarly driven to make good; as children, we were always immaculately dressed in photos, and she sewed most of our clothing. My dad joined the U.S. Air Force and I'm told my mother used a wool blanket she'd found in a barrack to tailor my older brother a very handsome little suit. Her social ambition was the reason she was on her way to a cotillion meeting in Salt Lake when she was killed.

I understand she and her mother-in-law didn't get along too well. Someone told me my mom wouldn't enter my grandma's house (or wasn't invited?); she stood on the porch, not crossing the threshold, and talked through the screen door. My father's parents were dyed-in-the-wool children of Mormon pioneers, and the consequences of disobedience were a matter of spiritual life and death. An unplanned pregnancy isn't part of a bishop's hopes for his son; it prevents a temple marriage. Before my Grandpa Dunford died early, leaving my grandma with their five sons, he had been the beloved LDS bishop of the Rivergrove 1st Ward from 1948–1956. He and his congregation built, with their own money and their own hands, the second oldest chapel in Utah Valley on 7th West and 8th North—I've seen silent super-8 footage. My grandma and her neighbors had bake sales to raise money for the building fund, and she regularly fed hungry workers on the construction site. They put in a glass-enclosed balcony at the back of the chapel that was a soundproof crying room. I liked standing there looking over the congregation's heads. There aren't any balconies in Mormon meetinghouses anymore—out of necessity these features have been eliminated, but I remember those original buildings. They had nooks

and crannies where I hid with friends. My grandma was utterly lost when her husband died; she didn't even know how to drive a car, but she pulled herself together, and it was by clinging steadfastly to the faith of her fathers that she was able to finish raising five boys by herself. Her faith was how she survived.

Grandma's religious devotion came from her parents. Ike's great-great-grandfather George Osmond and his young wife, Georgina, sailed on a ship to Louisiana, then up the Mississippi, then boarded wagons to Utah, where they built a log cabin. They were incredibly hard-working and faithful English immigrants and instrumental in building the Star Valley, Wyoming, community. They had overcome tribulation and finished their dream home when George was called to take a second wife and then sent to England on a proselyting mission. Apparently, none of them *wanted* plural marriage, but it was what they were asked to do. Here I feel a wide gulf open between my ancestors and me. In his history, George doesn't talk about what he wants, what he hopes for in his life, or how he understands himself. My journals are full of introspection and thoughts of how my life will be shaped by my choices and efforts. Even generations later, my Grandma Dunford's worldview wasn't much different from George's. When I lived with her during my young adulthood, our personalities often clashed on matters of faith. Occasionally, she answered my questions with "Because the Lord says so." Once, standing in her kitchen, she told me she'd never been depressed—unhappy, yes, but not depressed. She was emphasizing her inability to understand my point of view, and she succeeded in that. Her world had gradually disappeared as the twentieth century advanced, and she often remarked on this new world's strangeness. Her alienation was her essence, and her stubborn loyalty to the past counter-balanced my position in the present.

As the tabernacle is painstakingly restored in Victorian detail, its message will be clearer than ever, and the way that message contrasts with modern Mormonism will add to an ongoing discussion about contemporary Mormon architecture. Why aren't our modern buildings the product of our most gifted artists as our ancestors' were? The growth of the LDS population has resulted in a consolidation of artistic and financial decisions that ensure

architectural uniformity. In her article *The Cloning of Mormon Architecture*, Martha Sonntag Bradley writes, "In its exuberant pursuit of the efficient, economical and functional building, the Church appears to have lost sight of the value of buildings as more than structure."[5] And in 1968, when a single design was used for both the Ogden and Provo temples, University of Utah architecture professor Donald Bergsma responded:

> The very fact that one design was created for two separate temples *suggests* mass production is playing a role in contemporary Mormonism. The mercantilistic quality of the design *suggests* that modern Mormonism is more concerned with commercialism than with spiritual matters. The "newness" and "prettiness" of the design *suggests* a denial of the resolve of the early Church. . . . A wealthy church, in one of the world's most affluent societies, owes its faithful more than what they have been offered in these designs of the Church architect. The early pioneers would not have been so callous in their approach to housing the activities of their faith.[6]

In 1973, Mark Leone accused modern Mormons of tearing down old tabernacles because they remind us of what we no longer are.[7] Bergsma's assertion that modern Mormons are more commercial than their ancestors is probably true but it might also be an oversimplification. It is not only temples but temple *attendance* that has become much more common, which would suggest not less but more interest in spiritual matters. The sacrifices of early Utah Mormons were impressive; they seem more personal than my monthly tithing check. Architecture does make visible the difference between generations, and I am both attracted to and alienated by that difference. If nothing else, the difference captures our attention. Provo citizens venerated this building; virtually everyone is thrilled its exterior has been saved. However, I am grateful for the LDS Church's significant investment in the building not just because it makes me feel good when I look at it; it also makes me sad and strange, and a little inferior. I love the old parts of Provo because they bear the trace of generations past. I am sad its new function will be exclusive because, like the

equalizing practice of wearing white in the temple, it was an equalizing space for those with differing religious views. I have come to associate my faith struggle with this place that welcomed those of all faiths. It took on a function that its builders never would have anticipated: a place for a fragmented community to gather. And since faith is no longer a given, the tabernacle provided a particularly important place where we came together in a variety of faith's manifestations.

When I was a young adult, I crossed the Mormon boundary and explored new territory. I spent a lot of time by myself, driving to new places, taking long walks, smoking cigarettes on the train tracks, reading D.H. Lawrence. I ordered coffee at Joe's Spic and Span and hoped I'd run into one of my uncles—my mother's younger brothers. I was in their territory. I considered carefully and fully the possibility that the faith of my fathers might not be true. I exposed myself to the full blast of existential emptiness, ironically, while I lived in Bishop Dunford's steadfast and faithful house. I discovered that while these different worlds—those of "believer" and "nonbeliever"—were geographically interspersed, the divisions weren't just religious but also socio-economic. The railroad where my grandpa had worked was not physically far from the home of my new adopted family, but socially and culturally it might as well have been another country. I realized I could travel very far metaphorically just by stepping into the right building. The old train depot was a favorite; its women's bathroom was enormous with a large sitting area and a window for weeping and watching the train go. Another beckoning ghost building was the deserted motel on 5th West; when I went inside, I found each individual room key in its own separate dusty box as untouched as if I were in an episode of *The Twilight Zone*. I had to pull off a nailed board to get inside the old Brigham Young Academy. I stepped lightly up its expansive staircase and explored massive rooms until a guard dog chased me out. I wanted to know why people from the same background came to such different conclusions. In order to really understand, I needed to see things from their points of view, from their territories, so I explored. I wanted to reconcile these differences but I couldn't.

Grandma Dunford told me that once when I was a little girl staying with her after my mother's death, she went out to collect the wash from the line, and when she came back I was hysterical. I hadn't been able to find her. It is a singular sensation to be lost at home. If aliens had snatched her when she was collecting the wash and she had never returned, I would have kept searching and found her everywhere but nowhere. It was her house, her lamps, her curtains, her toaster oven; I would have kept finding her in all these items but losing her afresh with each "discovery." This embedded loss may be what William Luce refers to when he writes, "Hold your parents tenderly, for the world will seem a strange and lonely place when they're gone"[8]: strange because they are there and lonely because they're not. I was middle-aged when grandma died. The night before her funeral, I called the mortuary to ask if I could see her. They warned me when I arrived that she wasn't prepared for viewing. She was on a stretcher with a sheet over her; her shoulders were bare and her hair was wet from having just been washed. Her nose was thin, which confused me because her nose had never been thin in life. I looked and looked at her, trying to understand her body without her in it. It made no more sense to me than the world without her in it.

My grandmother knew where people went when they died. I don't know much about my mother's beliefs; apparently she didn't write them down. I don't know if faith was part of how she made meaning. Grandma Means told me she and my dad were taking temple prep classes when she was killed. Grandma told me my mom once said, "This can't be all there is." As testimonies go, that is actually more powerful than it might sound. It's a frank and humble expression of hope that any human, regardless of religious inclination, might embrace. Another elliptical testimony I treasure is a letter I received in the mission field from my adoptive father. He wrote, "I love you. I miss you. I can offer you no counsel." The significance of his gesture to trust me with his uncertainty was like an initiation. By going on a mission I made an investment in my belief, but I don't think belief is meant to resolve the pain of loss. That would be loss indeed. Instead, life feels truest when belief and loss co-exist. Throughout my youth, the open tabernacle brought

together a community of individuals with different views. Though the new Provo City Center Temple will house sacred rites, I believe we needed the tabernacle's common ground. I miss it even more because it seems to be there but is gone. Ironically, the fire imagery helps me advance; it sears a wound that kept me looking backward so I can move on.

Notes

1. Ben Pykles, transcript of interview conducted by author, January 30, 2014.

2. Ibid.

3. Kelly McConkie Henriod, "Memorable Events at the Provo Tabernacle," *Deseret News*, December 17, 2010, http://www.deseretnews.com/top/57/0/Memorable-events-at-the-Provo-Tabernacle.html.

4. Jon Bonnett, transcript of an oral history conducted in 2012, in *Historic Downtown Provo Oral History Project*, Charles Redd Center, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University, Provo, 2015.

5. Martha Sonntag Bradley, "The Cloning of Mormon Architecture," *Dialogue* 14, no. 1 (1981): 28.

6. Donald Bergsma, "The Temple as a Symbol," *Dialogue* 3, no. 1 (1968): 28.

7. Mark Leone, "Why the Coalville Tabernacle had to be Razed: Principles Governing Mormon Architecture," *Dialogue* 8, no. 2 (1973): 30–39.

8. William Luce, *The Belle of Amherst* (New York: Samuel French, 1976).