

BRINGING THE YANKEE HOME: A GAY MORMON, THREE DECADES ON

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Since joining the Church, I have been blessed with a number of revelations relating to my life as a gay Mormon. Perhaps more remarkable may be how few of these I actually understood correctly when I first received them. Time has provided them clarity.

Three of these I described in an essay published under the same pseudonym in *Sunstone* nearly thirty years ago.² Of these, the first was a private but crystal-clear spiritual prompting, as I first began to wrestle with my sexual orientation, that I had agreed in the preexistence to take this on. No elucidation as to *why* I would ever have done this having been provided (although I now know exactly why), I swiftly jumped to the conclusion that it was because I would, somehow, heroically triumph over it, perhaps (I flattered myself) becoming an exemplar

1. I've chosen to continue to use a pseudonym, after all these years, out of respect for the mother of the man about whom much of this essay revolves, who is still alive and may be hurt by the publication of details about him that might cause her pain or embarrassment. I have also altered small bits of my description of him to mask his identity. I have not altered any details about myself other than my name, and my identity will probably be easily ascertainable. I would ask, out of consideration for her feelings and her privacy, that those who do know it not post it on the internet.

2. "My God, My God, Why Hast Thou Forsaken Me?" Meditations of a Gay Mormon on the 22nd Psalm," *Sunstone*, August 1995, 44–55, reprinted in Terryl L. Givens and Reid L. Neilson, eds., *The Columbia Sourcebook of Mormons in the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

of how this could be done. The reality proved almost catastrophically the opposite. None of prayer, serving a mission, attending the temple frequently, or professional counseling yielded the triumph over my orientation that I had believed would follow, and within a decade I was so sorely tempted and so dismally defeated in my aim that a caring bishop had to spend many months counseling and urging me not to go through with the suicide that I had already mapped out (revolver, late evening at the office), at first convincing me to remain alive for just one week, and then a second, and then yet another. Ultimately, I went back to the Lord, laid out in prayer that I couldn't defeat this, couldn't overcome this, couldn't go on, and was given the second of the revelations: that if I lived my life with a man, with chastity before lifetime commitment and fidelity within it, I would not lose my salvation. It was hardly the answer, or the transformative miracle, for which I had hoped.

The third of those revelations becomes the focus of this essay. A year or two later, following an auto accident, I sought a blessing from my elder's quorum president, a rather unbending, gay-unfriendly, "hold to the iron rod" type. To his profound shock and dismay, he blessed me not only that my physical injuries would heal but also that I would "meet the man who is to be your companion in this life." He was visibly appalled, and speechless, following the blessing he had pronounced, but he was right. My injuries healed, and shortly after that, I met that man, although it took me nearly twenty years to figure out that I had.

It was in a doctor's office waiting room. I'd finished my appointment and returned to the waiting room while the office personnel processed my paperwork and filled my prescription. His was the second appointment following mine, and he was early. I can still recall vividly, thirty years later, opening the waiting room door and seeing him, his lanky form sprawled across one of the chairs. He was breathtakingly handsome. Somehow, as I sat waiting to be called up to the payment desk, I mustered the courage to chat with him, my inveterate icy formality undermined by his Southern charm. Then I was summoned to

the front, made my payment, and, still far too intimidated by him to be able to manage anything remotely more appropriate, turned to him with something like “it was very nice speaking with you,” and walked out the door.

A long hallway led to the parking lot. Halfway down it, I ducked into a restroom to regroup and to try to steel my nerve to go back. After ascertaining that no one else was there, I practiced aloud in front of the mirror, repeatedly, until I could muster the courage to walk back into the waiting room and proffer him my business card, but when I reentered the waiting room, he was gone. Downcast, cursing the shyness I felt around him but expecting that there was now no way I would ever see him again (I could hardly ask the women at the front desk to give him my phone number), I turned to trudge disconsolately down the hallway to the parking lot. Then I looked up. He was coming down the hallway toward me. He had tried to chase me out to the parking lot before I drove off but hadn’t seen me duck into the restroom.

He called me at the office later that day, eschewing the normal gay dating admonition to wait three days so that you don’t seem too interested, beginning, quite superfluously, by reminding me, in his Southern drawl, who he was (“Hah there, Aah’m that guy . . .”), as if there were a chance in the world I would have forgotten him in the intervening hours. “How often,” I wondered, “does he think this happens to me?”

We spoke on the phone several times, and our first date followed, although its beginning proved very rocky. My LDS moral standards for dating behavior (the gender of my date aside) were not exactly widely shared in our urban gay community, so I made it a point to make clear beforehand my no-sex-before-marriage rule so that there would be no awkward misunderstandings or disappointed expectations. It thus came as an unpleasant surprise when he arrived with a mattress tossed in the back of his pickup truck, suggesting that we drive up and park in the isolated hills far above our city’s gay ghetto. I was incensed. “Exactly which part of what I explained on the phone was not clear to you?” He

raised both palms and said, "Aah promise." It was probably unwise of me to rely on his promise, as he was a full six inches taller than I and powerfully built, but I flattered myself that I had excellent instincts for character (I was also a gym rat back then and quickly calculated that I could do serious damage if he tried anything), so I got into the pickup and off we went. He never broke that promise, not that evening, not ever. I don't recall if we even held hands, but I do recall lying in the back of that pickup truck next to him, staring at the stars above the hills, speaking quietly with one another until an owl hooted, and he shushed me and said, "That's Bob." After a pause, I began to talk again until the owl's mate hooted in response from the opposite direction, and I got shushed again. "That's Bobette." And I realized that this displaced Mississippi country boy had not brought me up into the hills hoping for sex. He wanted me to see with him the world he cared about, one so unlike the Wall Street and Mercedes life I led. I fell in love with him that evening, and I have never ceased to be deeply in love with him, even though as I write this he has been dead almost twenty-seven years.

I knew he would die from the day I met him. I was at that doctor's office for some minor medical ailment. He was there, he told me upfront, because he had AIDS, which back then was a death sentence. He was completely asymptomatic outwardly but had fewer T cells left than I had fingers and toes. I calculated that he would live two years, based on what then was the typical trajectory. Peculiarly, it emerged, as we grew to be an item, that despite having so very little left of his own life, what he wanted to do with what he did have left of it was to be my protector, to spend his life making sure that I was OK. "Would it help," he offered one evening as I complained about some nasty political problem at work, "if your six-foot-seven boyfriend showed up at the office?" I insisted that I was perfectly capable of handling it myself. Only later did I realize that the proper response to his offer really should have been "I love you too." Fortunately, he was very patient with me.

It would have been hard to imagine a more outwardly mismatched couple, even aside from our divergent HIV statuses. A chasm gaped

between our educational attainments, my Ivy League degrees (four of them) against his high school GED (he'd had to drop out of high school in his little town after confessing his gay inclinations to a counselor at his fundamentalist church, mistakenly thinking it would be kept private). To my friends, he looked like the closest thing they'd ever seen in the flesh to a character from *The Dukes of Hazzard*. My shocked best friend grasped valiantly for words following the double date at which I introduced Beau Duke³ to him and his live-in girlfriend (now wife), eventually settling, with studied diplomacy, on "he's too tall for you." Few would spend enough time around him to see that, whatever Beau lacked in formal education, his IQ was actually far higher than mine. Only one Ivy League friend, with whom we had also double dated, afterward wrote me a gracious note—one I still have—telling me "it was nice to meet [Beau] and to see how happy you are to be with him." I was. I've never been more happy in my life than when I was with him. I did, however, demur when he wanted to take me back to visit his small hometown in Mississippi. A gay couple in Mississippi in the 1990s? "They'll burn a cross on the lawn," I insisted. "Yeah," he deadpanned, "what wouldn't they do if Aah ever came home with a Yankee?" He won these verbal sparring matches every time, somehow managing to do so without me ever feeling like I'd lost. We had only one fight ever. It was, ironically as it turned out, about buying a car.

Sex was a difference too, at least on paper. Beau had been very sexually active (a gross understatement); I never had been. His then-untreatable disease terrified me, although we could in theory have limited our sexual activities to the narrower menu of safer ones. However, it seemed crystal clear to me that he could not possibly be the man who was supposed to be my "companion in this life" from that blessing. After all, he was going to be dead in two years, so he couldn't be "the one," couldn't be the man the Spirit had in mind when it prompted

3. When I pass through the veil and see him again, I am going to be in big trouble for this one.

that horrified elder's quorum president's blessing, right? *Right?* Beau was just a random guy along the way whom I had somehow managed to love more deeply than I'd ever thought possible. Should I get myself excommunicated, booted from my community, for such a short-term (and potentially medically dangerous) relationship? Wall Street said no. Doesn't pencil out. But there was another factor of paramount importance to me as well: my testimony, and in particular my testimony of the temple. Beau was going to die. I wished I could die in his stead. I would have done anything in the world to save him, but there was nothing I or anyone else could do—except, I grasped for straws, his temple work. No one else would ever do it. I doubted that I technically fell within the eligibility guidelines to submit his name, but, I thought, “I *dare* them to try to tell me he is not my family.” So I strove to keep myself from breaching the law of chastity so I could still go to the temple and surreptitiously recorded his personal information, and even committed his genealogy to memory as if I were some sort of Celtic bard, and wondered how on earth I was ever going to explain to Mr. Companion-in-This-Life, should he happen along inconveniently during the required one-year waiting period following Beau's death, that he was just going to have to sit back and wait for a year until I could do the temple work for Beau. It was the only thing I could do to save him, all I could do to help him. And I never again regretted the choice to be gay I'd been told I made in the preexistence, the choice I'd fought against and revolted against with everything I had for all those years in the past, because if it was what put me in the position where I could help Beau in any way at all, I would choose the same again in a New York minute.

Beau never protested the lack of sex. He did make jokes about it. Seeing my stare of disbelief once when he ordered an enormous volume of food (in a restaurant in a straight part of town), he loudly remonstrated, “But honey, you know I'm eating for two,” and then, as the waitress walked away and I tried to calculate whether I could render myself invisible by simply sliding under the table, added sarcastically,

“That would be an immaculate conception, now wouldn’t it?” He had other sexual outlets, with my knowledge. Very early in the relationship, I received, in error, a message from him trying to set up an anonymous sexual encounter with a man whose name he obviously didn’t even know. I couldn’t tell whether he was more surprised when I was the one who responded or that I quietly made it clear I did not care if he had anonymous sex. Had *we* been having sex, I would probably have cared a whole lot, but we weren’t, so to me this was, simply, the deal. It remained the deal. Later in the relationship, the only thing he ever said once, in a quiet moment together, was “This is different. Platonic.” He never once broke the promise he made to me on our first date, at the beginning of that evening up in the hills above the city with that mattress in the back of his pickup truck. In fact, the only one who ever started to break it was me, once, in a weak moment. He wordlessly declined to cooperate, just staring fixedly at me until I realized what this would mean and stopped in time, this man who saw himself as my protector, even from himself, even from myself, who was incapable of doing anything that he thought might hurt me. He never thereafter tried to coax or cajole or push me into sex, none of the usual “you know you really want to” (even though I had provided ample evidence that I really did). He never even mentioned it. Ever. He’s the closest I can come to understanding how a God who is omniscient can nonetheless promise to forget completely those sins I cannot help but recall in excruciating detail.

And then he died. It was actually closer to three years since the day we met, since the evening I fell deeply in love with him talking on a mattress in the back of his pickup truck, listening to the owls and gazing at the stars.

Grief proffers few comforts, but one is that it eventually leaves the bereaved person so emotionally seared that a strange kind of quiet sets in. One night following Beau’s death, as I left the office for home, bereft, alone, I vividly recall driving around a corner that I had otherwise

turned thousands of times over the years in my daily commute, and thinking, in that strange, almost detached, quiet: “Now I understand the Taj Mahal. Now I understand how a man can spend the whole rest of his life building a monument to his grief.”

One year on, I did his temple work. I recall next to nothing of his baptism itself, only, oddly, noticing the sign in the men’s changing room afterward, admonishing me, ungrammatically, to “dry off good.” His initiatory work I recall more vividly. The aged temple worker, noting how very young he died and focusing on the similarity in our ages rather than the difference in our surnames, asked if this was my brother. Guessing that “no, he was my boyfriend” would likely get me tossed out of the temple, I went with a laconic “no.” There was only one other patron in the initiatory booth at the time, a Cambodian brother doing the work for members of his family slaughtered in the killing fields. I reminded myself “you have not been singled out for tragedy.” I maintained my composure through his initiatory and then through his endowment until the veil, where I lost it completely, racked by sobs so severe that I was nearly doubled over and almost howling, as the stunned temple workers stood by, frozen. By the time my long paroxysm of grief subsided, the veil worker had completely lost track of where we were, so I asked myself the next question and answered it, and he resumed and let me pass through the veil.

That was supposed to be the end. Certainly, Beau wasn’t supposed to be my eternal companion. I assumed that the mention in that blessing of a companion “in this life” was because I would be resurrected out of being gay and would be straight in the next life. He wasn’t even supposed to be my companion in *this* one. Just a random meeting that somehow resulted in a love that a straight friend once told me was of a depth many people never get to experience in their lives. Just an accident.

Still, I couldn’t help building that monument to my grief. Once it was no longer too painful, Beau’s photograph appeared on my desk at work, where it sat for decades, forever twenty-nine as I careened

through—and beyond—middle age. (“Pretty soon people are going to stop asking if that’s your partner and start asking if it’s your son,” a colleague close enough to me personally to get away with saying that once joked.) At the peak of my career, when the annual bonus checks were enormous, I’d open them, look at Beau’s picture, and announce “we are in *high* cotton,” a Southernism he had favored. I left instructions that, when I died, his picture was to be placed in the coffin with me. (It was not clear how anyone was going to explain that to Mr. Companion-in-This-Life, assuming he outlived me, but I wouldn’t have to be the one to do the explaining, as I’d be dead.) I refused to get rid of my car (it’s a 1990; I still drive it) because I had squired Beau around in it. (“Park it in the driveway,” another colleague hissed through clenched teeth once it achieved a visibly embarrassing age, “and get another car.”) Passengers were not even allowed to touch Beau’s seat adjustments, which made things a bit uncomfortable for those not six foot seven (and even more so for anyone in the back seat), until I realized that my mechanic had been moving the seats regularly for years every time he serviced the car, which had grown to be quite frequently. No one was allowed to play “our song” in my presence. Indeed, no one was even allowed to play anything in my presence sung by our song’s *artist* (who obligingly soon fell out of fashion). When people asked how long I had been a widower, for that is how I described myself, I had an unnerving habit of answering with excessive precision how long it had been since I lost him (“thirteen years, three months, and twenty-seven days”) until I realized that, important as I thought this running count, others found it a little creepy. Once cell phones appeared, his picture went onto mine, and I began showing it to all and sundry, like some new grandparent indiscriminately imposing pictures of the grandchildren on reluctant audiences. (“You’ve shown us before,” people say, as they exchange embarrassed glances.) Having seen *Man’s Search for Happiness* too many times on my mission, I hoped, when I died, that it would be Beau who would come to take me home.

Notwithstanding all this, for some years I dated on and off, looking to find that companion in this life who was, after all, supposed to be showing up somewhere along the line. It was not half-hearted either, although Beau posed a pretty high bar. I got my heart broken once, and broke one once, and once was even engaged briefly, but none of the relationships ever went anywhere. "I'm not [Beau]," one of the more insightful ones told me. Meanwhile, the Lord kept dropping hints. I kept missing them.

The first came at perhaps the two-year mark after Beau's death. I went to stake conference one Saturday night, exceptionally, as I usually regarded the Sunday morning portion as plenty. As I sat there, quietly and almost alone in our stake center's beautifully historic chapel before the meeting began, a thought that felt remarkably like the Spirit passed through my mind: "He's your guardian angel now." Nothing further. "That's not us. That's the Catholics," I helpfully corrected the Spirit, batting this away. Apparently the Spirit deals poorly with attempts to correct it, as I don't recall receiving any significant revelations, on the gay subject or any other, for some time after that. Note to self.

Around year eleven after Beau's death, I grew extremely angry with him for dying on me, as if his death had been intentional, as if he hadn't warned me from day one. My life had begun to have bumps other than the gay issue, which had really been my lone albatross up until that time. "Life," I told him angrily in my head, "this business of *living*, this is actually really *hard*. How can you have left me to do this alone?" That guardian angel prompting should have clued me in, but I'd dismissed that as just some stray thought, maybe something too good to be actually real, so I still refused to grasp what was going on. A psychologist once observed trenchantly, in an unrelated context, that I stubbornly refuse to accept anything that might provide comfort as I consider that a sign of weakness, of needing a crutch, whereas suffering to me evidences strength and character. It was a hard habit to get over.

Then, in what may have been year sixteen, I was walking home one beautiful, sunny Saturday afternoon from my home teacher's house.

(Visiting his home was easier than cleaning up mine, and I was on foot because the grief-mobile was in the shop yet again.) Suddenly, unexpectedly, I felt, with an extremely strong assurance, that Beau was walking behind me. The impression was so strong that I actually turned around to look, as if it had somehow slipped my mind that he was gone. I saw nothing, and heard nothing, but the feeling would not go away. That may not have surprised me so much in the temple, where we believe such things occur on occasion (although I was stunned and frankly rather frightened the first time it actually happened to me there, as I'd previously dismissed Church leaders' remarks about the veil being very thin as just so much Church talk, sort of an LDS "stitch in time saves nine"). But this was on some sidewalk in broad daylight. I wasn't even tired. I discussed the incident with that psychologist who, happening to be a Latter-day Saint, did not conclude that I was suddenly becoming psychotic but rather speculated that Beau was letting me know he's got my back. I went home and played our song for the first time in sixteen years, over and over and over, had a very good long cry and got it out of my system, and finally admitted to myself that the Spirit might just have been right about this guardian angel business after all. It certainly was right about it a year later, the night my mother said goodbye to me (prematurely, it turned out; the doctors had underestimated how long she would survive), and I stood out in the cul-de-sac in front of the house staring at the sky above the prairies in order to process her words and compose myself. If I didn't know better, I'd have sworn that I felt Beau put his hand on my shoulder. But again, I could see no one standing there.

Up until perhaps six months before that latter incident, I'd still stubbornly refused to draw any relationship significance from the "guardian angel" prompting (which by now I finally acknowledged as a revelation) other than that Beau was apparently not only not gone forever but was not even completely gone. Somehow, I still came up with a way to dismiss this as impersonal, hypothesizing that Beau was somehow stuck with being my guardian angel because I had done his temple work for

him. Not that that made much sense. I've done the temple work for a lot of my ancestors, so if that was how it worked, I would be passing through life trailing a lengthy entourage of dead forbears. But it allowed me still to continue to feel very tragic about my life, so I went with it until one morning the Lord, interrupting my highly repetitious prayers in order to get a word in edgewise, decided I clearly wasn't going to get it on my own. "He chose this," He said gently. "He loves you." This was really starting to undermine that tragic-hero-Taj Mahal-monument-to-my-grief project.

That project came crashing down, suddenly and completely, through another revelation that followed not very long afterward. Mom's most dramatic downturn, which initially made any recovery appear nearly hopeless, prompted me to seek a spiritual confirmation that I would be able to be with my parents again after death. Clearly, that is one of the fundamental tenets of our faith, but I had never actually prayed about it nor sought any confirmation. I'd joined the Church decades before because I'd prayed about the Book of Mormon and received an unmistakable spiritual confirmation of its truth, and everything else just sort of came with the package. Now, I felt that I really needed to know *this*. So I got on my knees and for the first time presented the Lord with a fervent prayer on this issue.

I was so surprised by His answer that I did something I had never done before: I asked Him to hold it right there while I got a pen and paper to write this one down word for word: "Oh yes, you can go see them. Primarily, you'll be with [Beau], but"—and here, it sounded very much like He was smiling—"you can go visit." This threw me for a loop. Aside from the fact that I was initially somewhat offended that He was being so ebulliently cheerful about this when the whole point of my prayer was that my mother was dying (or so I thought; she lasted several more years—it was a roller coaster), this didn't make any sense from my worldview. As I mentioned, until this time, I'd assumed being gay was like a birth defect and that, in the resurrection, I'd be straight.

Awkwardly, I'd even sort of lined up a female friend, a devout Church member who'd never married, as kind of my eternity fallback. Now I was being told that Beau was not only that promised companion in this life, in the guardian angel sort of way, but that I was going to spend eternity with him. I hadn't even asked about Beau in that prayer, although the Lord had spoken of him to me in prayer a few days before. My world, or at least my understanding of the next one, tilted. However, having learned the hard way through that guardian angel revelation that telling a member of the Godhead that it had got it wrong didn't really pan out well, I decided to take Him at His word, to trust that He knew what He was doing, and finally to allow myself to feel joy in the fact that the man I had loved more than anything would not be lost to me forever. I would, one day, get him back. It was growing ever harder to cast myself as a tragic hero.

Beau kept showing up, usually in the temple. In fact, the first time I returned to do an endowment after a long hiatus (I had gone inactive for several years in protest of Proposition 8 but eventually came back), he stood there next to me and went through the endowment session with me. Despite all else that had occurred, I somehow was still reluctant to believe this was actually happening, so rather than either enjoying his presence or paying attention to the ceremony, I spent the whole time trying to figure out whether this time I was really having a psychotic break. "OK, it was a bad day at the office, but it wasn't this bad," I thought. By the time we entered the celestial room, however, his presence had become so unmistakable that I turned and spoke aloud to where I knew he stood. But I did later check with a physician to make sure I hadn't indeed had a psychotic break. You're a little old for that, he told me, a bit undiplomatically.

Beau continued to make appearances at intervals that were irregular but frequent enough that, when a temple worker once asked me in the changing room "Is your spouse with you in the temple today?" (obviously fishing for a witness couple), I was flummoxed and stammered

“I’m a widower, so I don’t actually know the answer to that question.” Another time, a night very near the end of December, when I’d arrived exhausted and sleep deprived from closing multiple complicated year-end deals (I tried to make sure I got to the temple each month at least once, and time was running out), I sat back in the endowment pretty much blissed out listening to the almost painfully beautiful trumpet concerto that in those days was the background music to the creation scenes—all the while feeling pretty amazingly holy just for being there at all—when Beau showed up and remonstrated: “You need to pay better attention. You’re supposed to be learning how to do this.” “Nagged from beyond the grave,” I retorted, but he was already gone. I did pay better attention after that, however, and was surprised to see what I learned. I now try to practice for the future by reminding myself that Beau was right more often than I was when he was alive and that he knows a lot more now. Little is so humbling as realizing that you will be spending eternity as the dumb one.

I finally internalized what all those revelations added up to. Eventually, for lack of any other ceremony, I stood in the office one day, alone, the door shut, figuring that if Beau was doing guardian angel duty he must be in earshot someplace (do they get breaks?) and solemnly promised him eternity. I’d never promised him that in life, as I’d thought he was just an accident, a mistake, a detour on the path to my companion in this life and then the woman with whom I’d spend eternity. I could sense that he was there and was moved by my promise, perhaps because I had finally made him a commitment. Few antidotes to commitment phobia are more powerful than missing someone fiercely, aching, for twenty-five years. Beau also knew that, for all my myriad weaknesses and flaws, I never broke promises. We had shared that trait.

There was one more surprise in store. Beau wasn’t exactly omnipresent or available on call, so life could still become lonely, trial filled, and depressing. It was easy at times to wallow in my sorrows rather than steadfastly looking toward my more joyful (I now finally acknowledged)

post-death future. One such morning, kneeling in a dowdy motel near the facility where my mother lay ill, I was saying my prayers, not about anything in particular that was wrong so much as juxtaposed against an extremely well-honed backdrop of self-pity because Beau was dead, Mom was dying, I'd be alone, blah blah blah. The Lord had had enough, evidently. In the closest tone to exasperation that I've ever heard in a revelatory experience, He interrupted my whining with a quiet but firm "Both of you wanted to rescue each other." Just those eight words. Fleeting, with my usual pedantry, I thought this couldn't actually be a divine revelation because the grammar was off (shouldn't it be "*each* of you wanted to rescue *the* other"? Surely God can speak English correctly), although upon a little reflection, I concluded that the grammar might actually be correct if what had happened was that Beau and I couldn't agree on which of us got to rescue the other so told the Lord we both requested mutuality.⁴ Given our personalities, this was actually not improbable. As the revelation sank in, though, I realized, shocked, that it meant we had *asked* for this. Well, maybe not exactly for *this*, which has proven very painful for both of us, but apparently the big picture here is what we *chose*. Only then did the revelation sink in further, and I finally saw, as my jaw hit the floor, that this also meant that I had known Beau, and that we'd apparently cared deeply about each other in some fashion, before. Back there. Back before we were born. Not once in the many years since I met Beau had it occurred to me, not a single time had it so much as crossed my mind, that this relationship began other than at the moment I walked into that doctor's waiting room and saw him sprawled across that chair. Afterward, I finally switched from thanking the Lord in my daily prayers for sending me such a competent guardian angel—a portion of my prayer that somehow always felt

4. Beau of course won this one too, as I only had to go to the temple for him once (although that was the single most important thing I've done in my life), whereas he's had to do guardian angel duty for decades already.

like it bounced back off a leaden dome blocking heaven—and instead thanked Him one morning for putting Beau and me, like broken pieces, back together. And the Spirit just flowed.

It's hard to feel self-pity when you know your situation is what you asked God for. It also gave form to the story of my life—the arc, as the screenwriters would call it. I had first tried to write it as a hero's tale, with me as the hero, of course, showing the world how homosexuality could be overcome, lighting the way. When that failed miserably and then Beau died, I tried for years, for decades, to cast my life as high tragedy, with the pain, the sadness, the irretrievable loss, and me as the tragic hero. The Lord nixed that one. It turns out that it's actually a love story, like those sappy romantic comedies in which impediments more apparent than real are overcome and the protagonists get to live (or in our case die) happily ever after. The difference is that ours plays out over sixty years (or very much longer indeed) instead of one hundred minutes. Just a love story. I don't even get to be a hero. Well, except maybe to one man who somehow managed to believe that I was the greatest despite actually knowing me. It also explained a peculiar feature of my patriarchal blessing. Unusually from what my friends tell me of theirs, it admonishes me—repeatedly—that my life is “but a small moment” in light of what the Lord has in store. A blip. When the patriarch gave that blessing to me at nineteen, did he foresee that I would be a widower for forty or fifty or sixty years before I could be reunited with the love of my life? Of my eternity? The Lord obviously did. He plays a long game, but I've learned, belatedly, to repose trust in His plans and His revelations. He's got this.

My newfound confidence regarding the future (and the blurring of the line between the living and the dead) has profoundly changed my approach to my own ultimate death. A good friend told me I am less afraid of dying than anyone he's ever seen. He's probably right. On a plane flight, when an engine exploded into flames and the other passengers degenerated into various species of panic, I said a quick prayer,

gave Beau a heads up with a casual “Honey, it looks like I’m going to be home early tonight,” and sat there quietly reading. My concern now is more with not messing up before I die so that I can count on what has been promised.

After the events described in this piece, Beau started to make fewer and fewer appearances, in the temple or out. Perhaps I require less guarding now (or less prodding to pay attention in the temple), perhaps in the economy of heaven, as we call it, he’s taken on other tasks. Tempted by how much I miss him still, I’ve tried at times to force or conjure up his presence, but it never works, and I know when I’m cheating. But the Lord has stood ready to remind me of what I’ve been told, ready to provide comfort when the going gets rough, even if I myself am the one making it rough. Some months back, they changed the endowment ceremony, something I didn’t learn until, early that Tuesday morning, I was already seated, and it was almost ready to start. After decades as a gay man in the Church experiencing wounding statements—some perhaps imagined, many all too real—I panicked. What if there were some barbs in the new text? What if I couldn’t endure this? I was completely wound up when the endowment began, waiting for some blow to fall, sure one was coming, when words were spoken as part of the metaphor we use to describe our potential heavenly future, words that I interpreted as limited to straight people (although in fact they were really fairly vague). “Aha,” I thought, “*there* it is.” And then the Spirit intervened, quietly but with unmistakable firmness and clarity telling me “you can rule and reign with [Beu].”

So, the next question: is any of this real? For those who do not share LDS beliefs on the veil or how eternity works (and perhaps even some who do), the answer is obviously no. Here we have a man who, after over a quarter of a century, *still* is unable to deal with the death of his beloved. Someone who to this day drives a car barely a notch above having a wire hanger for an antenna (it’s so old you can no longer get parts) because of its connection to that man. Clearly, this is nothing

but pathetic wish fulfillment on the part of someone who might even be borderline psychotic. They could be right, I suppose, although no one who knows me appears to think I'm psychotic, and people with major disconnects to reality typically are not highly respected and fairly prominent in their professional fields, financially successful, and (I wish Mom had lived to see this) listed in a national directory of prominent Americans. The wish fulfillment is harder to answer, and I can respect those who reject my experiences on that ground. I would wonder more often myself were it not for a dear friend in my ward, a "calling widow" with whom I typically sit in the balcony at church (her husband is in the stake presidency so is usually off somewhere else) and who has the gift of discerning spirits, as St. Paul called it,⁵ in greater measure than I do. One week, the Lord had told me, unprompted as so often, during morning prayers that I could go out again rather than, as I was doing, basically just waiting to die so I could be back with Beau. I frankly had no desire whatsoever to do anything other than wait to be with Beau, so I told Him that was all very well and good but I wouldn't even consider it unless I knew that Beau would be OK with it. I thought I had boxed the Lord in on that one. So come Sunday, sitting in the balcony, Beau showed up, leaving me perplexed because this was neither the temple nor a situation in which I was likely to need a guardian angel. (We're in church. What could happen?) As I sat there, wondering what on earth he was doing there, my friend leaned over and asked, "Was your partner sarcastic?" My mind shot back to that immaculate conception remark. Big time, why? He just came up to me and told me "I have a life." Later, after my mother died (this loyal friend served as the proxy for her temple work), my friend and I were speaking between meetings and, as I chattered on, she suddenly interrupted me with a firm "Pause." I did, and thus sensed the presence of both Mom and Beau. "They're here," I said. "He's teaching her the Gospel," she responded. Of

5. 1 Corinthians 12:7-11.

course, neither of these experiences would likely prove anything to the non-Saints, although the former one would need to posit some form of telepathy between my friend and me unless Beau in fact had actually been there. Anyway, for me personally, it's enough to show that this is not all just wish fulfillment.

What of those who do share LDS beliefs? Here, I would expect the pushback to be even more vigorous, as, although they will believe in the mechanism, they will disbelieve the content because the idea that God could have reunited two men so that they could spend eternity together does not comport with current doctrine. ("Current" because one of our articles of faith, distilled to its essence, is that there are an awful lot of important things we don't know but that will be revealed in the future. Plus, you can't sit through the endowment ceremony very many times before figuring out that "this is how we've done it before" sometimes doesn't jive with what God wants this time around. See, Beau? I'm paying attention.) At least one objection seems to be the assumption that spirit children are created via sexual reproduction, necessitating opposite sex partners for that portion of the plan of salvation to work, although that's a subject about which we actually know very little. I do recall that it used to come up in elders quorum every several years. (I wondered whether it came up as much in Relief Society, where the prospect of being pregnant billions of times might seem less appealing.) However, all this involves projecting our human condition onto heaven's, where a whole lot of things have not yet been revealed to us and where ancient and modern prophets are reduced to metaphors for something whose reality is apparently far beyond human ability to grasp or describe—angels with wings on fire and streets paved with gold and precious stones and (the LDS one) kings and queens, priests and priestesses, to the most high God. What's coming we see almost only through a glass, darkly. Joseph F. Smith did see the hosts of the dead but mostly described things of religious significance—the aching for resurrection, the task of preaching the Gospel—not what family

units the dead would be organized in or what would follow when the Lord delegated the creation of other worlds to them. So I have to content myself with my personal experiences, with what I know myself. What I know, since I am a convert to the Church, is that the nature of the revelatory experiences I described in this article is indistinguishable from the nature of the experiences that provided me a testimony of the Gospel in the first place and brought me into the Church and fortified my testimony of the temple. They're one and the same, so stand or fall together. If I cannot believe that these revelations are actually divine, there is no reason to believe that the earlier, so very similar, revelations were divine either, and I'm left back on my own to figure out whose teachings, if anyone's, are transcendently true. I choose to believe that the revelations are all true rather than that they are all false. I could be wrong, this all could have been wish fulfillment from inception, but I guess that is the role that faith plays.

I try to get to the temple twice a month now, wherever I am, so some weeks ago I stood in front of the temple in Manhattan—an unusual one in that it houses other Church functions on different floors. Its facade can thus have glass that is transparent, allowing one to see into at least several feet of the building, to the opaque bronze temple doors to the left and to the entry for other functions to the right. As I stood there, a woman in her early thirties, dressed less formally than most people attending the temple, stopped and stood in front of the building, gazing long and fixedly through the glass. I finally asked if she was looking for the Family History Center, which is hard to locate from outside. No, she hadn't been to the temple in a very long time and just wanted to look in, she told me, as she stared into the building. The ceremony was recently changed, I encouraged her. It's really quite beautiful now. She thought her temple recommend might no longer be good. How long ago did you get it? About ten years. Well, yes, you would have to get a new one then. She doubted she could. She was living now with her boyfriend and vouchsafed that, at the time she had served a mission

some years previously, she had presented as a man. I had not recognized that she was transgender but reassured her that I was a member of the LGBTQ community too and was not judgmental. How did I reconcile this, how did I make this work, she asked. I told her that my partner, my beloved, had been dead for almost twenty-seven years, so there was no subsisting same-sex marriage for them to be concerned about, and I obviously wasn't having sex with him, who was long dead, so there really wasn't anything they could do to keep me out of the temple. But I know I can be with him for eternity, I told her. She seemed quite moved, but the endowment session would start shortly, so I handed her my business card in case she wished to speak further and excused myself to go upstairs and change into my white clothing to take my place in the endowment room and do my work for the dead.

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OLIVER ALDEN is a pseudonym. The author, an active member of the LDS Church who identifies as a gay man, previously published, in the August 1995 issue of *Sunstone*, an essay about his experiences coming to terms with his sexual orientation and the expectations of the LDS Church.