

MAGIC, MEMORY, AND MOTHER EARTH

Aubrey Johnson

From Matriarchs

I come from a multigenerational line of women who crave Mother Earth. My great-grandma worked in Yellowstone National Park every summer and married a Yellowstone architect. My grammie basically grew up there, as did my mother—alternating each childhood summer between a Yellowstone–Grand Tetons double feature and Yosemite National Park.

My siblings and I, growing up on the Washington side of the Columbia River, didn't spend quite so much time at those national parks as our mom did. Instead, my grammie (a passionate biologist) rounded up her descendants at every family gathering, and we traipsed through the closest forest or wetland boardwalk. If we couldn't organize that, she scattered us to the front yard where we climbed trees and played pretend under pine boughs that almost touched the ground. To this day, she likes to stop us in our tracks and exclaim over a great blue heron or hummingbird flying by. She has an iconic "animal spotted" cry we all joyfully imitate now as adults.

Rather than limiting our explorations to Wyoming and Montana, my mom put her geology degree to good use by taking us all over the country in a worn Kia Sedona to understand Mother Nature. We scattered native wildflower seeds; pulled over on dirt roads to moo at cow herds; brushed our fingers along igneous, metamorphic, and sedimentary rocks; dug up fossils; and stayed up late with our eyes glued to telescopes in public observatories. Don't get me wrong, we were not

much of a “spend a week in a tent” kind of family. We go up gentle grades where we can stop and take pictures as much as we like, and preferably there’s a bed and shower waiting for us at the end of the day. Even so, after years of leaning against a wooden fence and straining my eyes for any sign of a whale spout, my heart sings in rhythm with Pacific Ocean waves crashing against a rocky shore. In the gentle slip of wind brushing past trees, I hear my own breath. When I close my eyes, I picture rain clattering against the roof.

I long for my rivers and waterfalls, my trees and mountains, with an ever-present ache. Going back feels like my chest releasing and being able to breathe again. In my family, each woman’s homeland is different. But we share our longing with centuries of women before us, which is how we ended up following some European pagan traditions like solstices, May Day, and Beltane. Each time we step outside and light candles or bonfires, we celebrate our family and its connection to Mother Earth and divine femininity.

Perhaps this deep feeling is why we have become people who avidly consume stories and tell our own stories in turn. We’re not necessarily good at it, but we love creating. My grammie painted landscapes; my mom acts in, directs, and produces theatre; and my siblings and I generally share passions for creating art by performing in various mediums, photographing people and places, playing *Dungeons & Dragons*, writing, and crafting poetry. And every single one of us reads. That can take many forms—story podcasts, audiobooks, ebooks, print—but we’re the sort of family who arrive at a motel and read until it’s time to sleep. On those long road trips across the country, if we weren’t feeling the audiobooks we’d brought, we’d select one of the many books on hand and pass it around to read out loud chapter by chapter.

All this to say that, having been immersed in stories and nature basically from birth, a part of me still believes in magic.

You see, during those drives and woods walks, my mom would point out a perfect circle of moss or a particularly ancient-looking

erratic glacial stone and say, “The fairies have been here!” It changed the way I see the world. If I look closely at the tiniest details, I see the magic. I see it in the way forests are reborn after a fire, in a butterfly’s epic migration, in the spiral of leaves on a flower, in the salmon’s fierce determination to return to where it was born to lay new eggs. I also see it when I hold hands with my dad in the grocery store or when one of my best friends invites me spontaneously to a movie after I’ve had a really hard week. These things may not have been caused by fae influence, but they hold a swelling of effervescent divinity. Divine magic doesn’t come in a flash of sparkles because it has always been here. It is the song of spiritual creation that came before the physical and bound all things irrevocably together. It is *life!* Everything breathing in and out as one.

Mind over Matter

My heart’s intuition feels these connections even if my brain’s logic cannot see them. For over a decade, I’ve hurled myself through life without pause to avoid true, consistent stillness. I don’t want to feel my brokenness. Instead, I’m busy perfecting an external image of intelligence, competence, and high-achieving practicality. Maybe if everyone else sees me that way, I’ll metamorphosize into that woman. It took going on a mission and being forced to sit in silence with myself an hour every day before I could even see the walls I’d built around myself.

In the past two years, however, it feels like my heart is its own sovereign fighting back against me—and it’s using my body to help it. I experienced this battle as symptoms of an illness: a month when I literally couldn’t go a day without a midday nap (which my doctor attributed to a classic Pacific Northwest Vitamin D deficiency), two semesters of frequently staying up until 4 or 6 a.m. because I didn’t want to face the responsibilities of tomorrow, two summers of significant financial insecurity that left me rationing everything in my life. Through all that, I felt a craving—a craving for rest, connection, and

nature. I have been looking through a glass darkly, and I'm finally letting it crack.

I experience this process day by day, with a walk by the river, weekly quadball practice in a grassy Bountiful park, breathing in summer thunderstorms from my balcony, and on family vacations that bring me back to rivers and trees. I felt it as my mom, sister, and I drove up the winding road to the top of Signal Mountain, following the same path we'd taken to scatter my bubba's ashes there that morning. On that warm night, we leaned against the car and looked up, and I glimpsed the Milky Way for the first time since I was a child. When I am old and forgetful, I probably won't remember the constellations we identified (or the ones we made up). But I hope I remember standing with the women of my family, surrounded by darkness and nevertheless lit from above, delighting in a shooting star and the steady beat of circling satellites.

Getting too caught up in my daily responsibilities or unrealistic expectations overwhelms me, and then I stop seeing the divinity in humankind. I can't appreciate the collective inspiration required to produce an art gallery or rejoice in the thousands of hours a group of people committed to create a Studio Ghibli movie. I visit the farmer's market intent on my items or a good deal instead of looking around and recognizing how wonderful it is to have a community gathering place where people can exclaim over the products of dedicated progression and labor. Listening to a live jazz band while sitting in a bar or dancing in a plaza will always be more meaningful than watching a recording of it by myself at 1 a.m. But while I know this intellectually, it doesn't stop my introverted, tired self from burying myself under blankets and retreating to the numb promised safety and escapism of consuming content.

So, having spent the summer reflecting, I have a goal now: to reconnect with and reclaim my "essential self"—the parts of me that want to play, experience magic, and explore without any pressure to produce. I'm tired of facing my limitless divine potential and dreading the

inevitable conclusion that I can never fulfill it entirely in this life. I want to focus on relationships: my relationship with God, with Jesus Christ, with others, and with myself. I want my body and my spirit to exist in harmony with each other. I want to embrace whimsical and nonconsequential creation without pressuring myself to actually be any good at those things. Because women are, that they might have joy, and the weight of trying to be 100 percent engaged in everything is crushing me, not lifting me. I have to let go and, honestly, just stop thinking so much. It's time for me to start feeling my way through life instead.

Meditating on the Gospel

This includes how I approach church. I love a deep dive into doctrine, but I commit myself to digging a well without checking maps of where the water runs, so I end up hitting rocks instead. Intellectually analyzing aspects of the gospel and scriptures—verbiage, history, context—are just tools to help us look at principles in a new way. There isn't an end-all-be-all correct way of interpreting or applying anything. Everything from tithing to Sunday worship has gray areas for people to make individual choices about how they apply these concepts in their lives. When do you pay tithing? How long do you fast? Do you fast from food and water or just food? Do you watch movies on the Sabbath? Do you see friends? Do you focus more on the alcohol, drugs, and coffee parts of the Word of Wisdom, or do you also prioritize eating fruits and vegetables in season and sleeping enough? During the twentieth-century, Church leadership and academics sought to intellectualize anything they could in order to justify it to the world. They wanted everything wrapped up in a neat narrative, like Book of Mormon geography, DNA, and Church history. But it's not always possible. Humans are messy. Humans have always been messy. The Church is messy now, it was messy 100–150 years ago, and it was messy 2,000 years ago. Even the Apostles weren't immediately jumping on board with some of Jesus's teachings. Peter protested teaching Gentiles, maybe because a lifetime

of cultural teachings doesn't just overturn during four-or-so years at Jesus's side. A community becoming more inclusive and open to others is a hard-fought process taught over generations.

I'm not saying we shouldn't ask questions to understand history and context. Far from it! Our past is what created our present and should therefore be included in the conversation. What I'm saying is that I'm tired of people inventing divine explanations for human mistakes or ill intent—like the priesthood ban or the “shielding” of Heavenly Mother. We don't like acknowledging our own mortal ignorance, let alone the ignorance of our leaders. But how many scriptures remind us that we are only getting a hundredth of the knowledge? How many talks has President Nelson given since becoming the prophet reminding us that we are part of an ongoing Restoration and we only have a thimble full of understanding? Why is it so hard for us to say, “Right now, I don't actually know.”

I used to think the priority was knowing. I needed to have answers to every question right now, with a scriptural reference to back it up. No one can needle me for not being able to explain away my faith. It feels uncomfortable, possibly even unsafe, to not have justifications I can express. We hear that word all the time in testimonies: I *know* the Church organization and principles are from God, I *know* Joseph Smith was a prophet. And if you know that, great. But to understand something in your mind doesn't automatically mean you know it in your heart. Overanalyzing means we're not *feeling* truth in our hearts and bodies, and therefore we're not using the full extent of the gifts God has given us. Our bodies aren't accessories we've draped our spirits in for the time being— they're essential. This entire physical world is essential. When I slow down, I can feel my body and my Mother Earth crying out, because I have so easily forgotten and neglected these gifts.

Feeling the Spirit looks different for everyone. Our bodies can become chronically disconnected by way of mental illness or condition,

substance use disorder, dysmorphia, or disability. But the scripture “ask and ye shall receive” is not a promise limited to able-bodied, neurotypical people. *All* people can receive direct and personal answers to their questions, worries, and dreams, and no one else gets to dictate what your personal direction should look like. If all things are a witness of God, all things are a channel through which God can speak to you. That might be the scriptures or going to the temple, or it might be going to the ocean, listening to music, looking at art, building relationships, taking care of an animal, sitting at home watching the rain fall, seeing a play, or dancing. We have a world full of examples of cultures and faiths that connect to divinity in a myriad of ways. We can learn from them. The most important element, in my opinion, is that you’re making time to purposefully connect and reflect without distraction. What communicating with the heavens looks like beyond that is up to you. I remind myself of this though: our heavenly parents want a relationship with me; they want me to understand, so they’ll use tools that make sense to me wherever I am in my life right now.

I’m surrounded by people inside and outside the Church who have opinions about my approach to the gospel. I was talking last week to a new friend who gently predicted that my perspective would eventually lead me to leaving the Church, and he reassured me that it would be okay “when” I did. At the same time, listening to General Conference or Sunday meetings I sometimes feel pressure that my connection to God isn’t legitimate, because it doesn’t sound similar to the experiences of those leaders and teachers. As a queer Latter-day Saint, people in the Church tell me directly that I don’t belong here. But Jesus went after the one sheep and met it where it was and carried it on his shoulders. He went to people’s homes and met them on the streets to teach and heal them. I don’t need to be in any other place other than exactly where I am now in order to reach God, *my* God: my Mother, my Father, my Brother.

Like Magic

As I danced around a Beltane bonfire with my mom and siblings, I felt the heat on my face and retreated to a safe distance. That power, I thought as a child, was some sort of magic we instigated. Fire transforms energy, using the potential of the wood to fuel an explosive release into the sky. When the song and scriptures tell us that the Spirit is like a fire burning, they're reminding us that listening to our divinely made bodies and hearts will transform us. Changing how we think and act to reclaim the lost, good parts of ourselves never feels easy or safe. But consider how empty the universe would be if the stars didn't burn.

Last summer, returning to Yellowstone and the Grand Tetons with my family, I could feel the family ties that bound us there. The tree where we scattered my bubba's ashes is the same tree where his parents' ashes were scattered. When I felt that connection again, I remembered who I want to be and who I want to become: like my Heavenly Mother—made in her own image. Knowing that through Jesus Christ I have the power to change and make that happen, well, *that* is magic too.

AUBREY JOHNSON {johnsonaubrey34@gmail.com} studied public relations and international development at Brigham Young University. Her poetry and photography have been published in *Exponent II* and *Warp & Weave*. She has worked in science communications and civic engagement and currently serves as the outreach and public relations lead for the nonprofit RaYnbow Collective. She spoke on youth advocacy at the Mormon Women for Ethical Government conference last year.