

LETTERS

The Backslider Exposed

It's my guess that after Levi S. Peterson's "In Defense of a Mormon Erotica" appeared in *DIALOGUE* (Winter 1987), you needed more secretaries to handle the mail (for or against) than Ann Landers would need after defending nudity in college classrooms. [In seven months, this is the first letter we have received. — *Ed.*]

Here, finally, my wife and I have a point to agree on. When I informed her that Peterson had previously published a book entitled *The Backslider*, she astutely snapped back, "Makes sense. Obviously, it's an autobiography."

My own feelings about Peterson's self-serving argument for erotica in real life parallel a favorite line of mine from the play *Butterflies Are Free*. To paraphrase an observation from a mother to her blind son: "Diarrhea is a part of life too, but we don't need poetry about it" and we certainly don't need hemorrhoids and pain in every creative chapter to proclaim ourselves well and alive.

Incidentally, I loved every word of "The Third Nephite" (Winter 1986).

Ron Richardson
Orem, Utah

Those Poplars

I second Darlene Phillips's "Of Politics and Poplars" in the Winter 1987 *DIALOGUE*. I've been trying for a long time to say what she said, but could never quite get it —

PIONEER POPLARS

Long lines of poplars
Still stand sentinel
Against the blinding aspect
Of a naked God in a virgin land

A solid century ago
When only limits of vision meted horizons,
When Mormon folk, feet anchored in the
earth,
Rose high as Lombardy poplars.

They die from the top down.
Skeleton fingers protrude
Starkly from lush low foliage,
Pointing to the sky

Above trunks gnarled
As wrists of grandfathers.
Those that have yet to yield
To the surety of decay

Stand in condemnatory staunchness
Among crippled brethren.
Mute witnesses:
Shoulder the sky or die.

There were pioneers
Tall as heaven-stretched poplars,
Stately as pioneer poplars.
Even the seedlings

Huddled at the feet of those dead giants
Are all aspiration,
All up and thrust,
Certainty of God in every arrowy reaching.

I'm relieved that Darlene managed to get it said, and said so well.

Steve Walker
Provo, Utah

Remembering the MTC

Having been one of the hundreds of missionaries that Gary Bergera taught, I was very interested in and touched by his article about his six years at the Missionary Training Center. Countless images and memories flooded into my mind as I read Bergera's experiences.

I remember well my own feelings of doubt and despair, joy and triumph at each

failure and victory in my personal struggle to be the missionary I believed that I should be. I cannot forget the times that I sat in a classroom as if in a trance, listening to a language that I did not understand and wondering if I ever would. More than once I wept in anger and frustration over my inability to learn the language or memorize the discussions.

Although I was one of those missionaries who leaves the MTC without having passed off the discussions, I left with only good feelings about my experience there. As difficult and trying as it was, for better or for worse (and I personally believe it was for the better), the MTC and my mission made me what I am today, and for that, I am grateful.

Craig L. Foster
Provo, Utah

Thomas S. Ferguson Letters

I am writing a biography of Thomas Stuart Ferguson, a Book of Mormon archaeologist and the founder of the New World Archaeological Foundation. I am looking for letters from Tom Ferguson to document his views on the Book of Mormon, the book of Abraham, or Mormonism in general. I would very much appreciate receiving a copy of any Ferguson letter written from 1968–83 that might be in possession of a DIALOGUE reader.

Stan Larson
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Encouraging Words

I've found DIALOGUE most enlightening and a sweet relief from the emptiness so often found in "Church publications." Although the Church has some very positive things to address, I do wish it would encourage freedom of thought as a staple for a healthy testimony.

It seems that the Church is entering the Christian world more by encouraging its members to blind obedience than by teaching the divine capacity of understanding.

I wish your journal continued success in its goal to enlighten and question.

Paul Harris
Calgary, Alberta

Book Review Questioned

Lavina Fielding Anderson's review of John L. Sorenson's *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Spring 1988) did not provide the scholarly evaluation that your readers deserve. By not inviting an acknowledged Meso-American archaeologist/historian — preferably non-LDS — to respond to Sorenson's work, you have insulted our intelligence and your editorial integrity.

Rick Grunder
Syracuse, New York

Archaeology of the Psyche

DIALOGUE has become my archaeologist. It digs deeply into my psyche, unearths notions that have been embedded there for years, lifts them out, brushes them clean, examines them, and then uses them to confirm or disprove previously held ideas — and even, at times, to postulate new probabilities. DIALOGUE ceaselessly examines the artifacts, and I, excited by this intellectual catharsis, look forward to each successive dig.

Milton E. MacInnis
Dartmouth, Nova Scotia

A Plea for Help

I am a long-time reader and admirer of DIALOGUE and particularly enjoyed the Winter 1987 issue, with Lavina Fielding Anderson's interview with outgoing editors Jack and Linda Newell. This letter is a

plea for help. Though I agreed intellectually with the logic of Jack's statement that "Intellectual independence and institutional loyalty are contradictory terms . . . our ultimate loyalties should be to principles, not to institutions or individuals" (p. 23), I suffered some severe internal conflict in doing so.

I recalled words attributed to the Prophet Joseph Smith, "Above all, be faithful to the Brethren. God will overlook many of our human failings, but never disloyalty to the Priesthood" (loosely paraphrased from *Documentary History of the Church*). And I recalled the trials of the period of polygamy persecution when, with many of the Church leaders "underground," even children were taught to lie to federal marshals to protect General Authorities. As a consequence many felt that a Mormon's word could not be trusted. Even Mormon citizens willing to swear they were not polygamists were disenfranchised in the neighboring state of Idaho.

We live in reasonably settled times, but the prophets have foretold a future of major unrest and uncertainty. And looking to that future, my dissatisfaction with Newell's ideas intensified as I read Eugene England's comments later in the same issue regarding God's use of sometimes contradictory instructions to teach us that:

Trust in our personal experiences with divinity must sometimes outweigh our rational morality. . . . We must learn, sometimes very painfully, to be open to continuous revelation . . . because truth and history are too complex to be reduced to simple, irrevocable commandments—even from past prophets. . . . Obedience to divine commandments . . . must sometimes supersede our understanding of earlier commands if we are to transcend the human condition of even our best intellectual culture and religion (p. 141).

Somehow I feel like the proverbial ass between two equal bales of hay contemplating Newell's advice to follow our own (even if inadequately formed) conscience in questions of moral choice, and England's arguments in favor of celestial guidance.

But even accepting England's indirect criticism that the Newell position does not take into account the complexity of human—not to mention celestial—reality, I cannot go all the way with England, finding it utterly incomprehensible that God would have given the law of plural marriage to the patriarchs and our own Mormon forebears only to confront them in eternity with having to choose a "favorite wife" (after teaching them to avoid such preference in mortality—even if, as Gene asserts, some failed to observe this part of the commandment). Perhaps this is because I find myself sealed to two women, each of whom I love in a different way, but with equal devotion. So perhaps I am reluctant to accept England's conclusions fearing that I will have to choose between my wives in eternity (should any of the three of us get there). England himself strongly defends such transcendental love later in his argument in defense of monogamy (p. 144). If you haven't experienced this love with more than one woman, don't say it ain't possible! Moreover, if we extend into the hereafter his argument that a larger than statistically probable proportion of today's faithful members descend from polygamous unions (p. 142), is this not itself a strong argument for celestial polygamy? Nor can I dismiss as easily as Gene the many authorities quoted (p. 149) who taught that polygamy is the celestial order of matrimony.

Unlike England, I am convinced by observation and experience as a branch and district president, bishop, and member of two stake presidencies that there are considerably more faithful LDS women than stalwart priesthood holders. And I fully expect that fewer of us males find our way to the celestial kingdom than Eugene seems to anticipate. After all, we are considering the highest degree of the celestial kingdom, and it may well be that the problem is not, as Gene imagines, too few women to make up plural households, but a gross insufficiency of males qualified for a "continuation of the seed."

Finally, after telling us that we must be open to new marching orders, England himself raises the question about which authorities we should accept and when and how much to accept them (p. 151). Who is right, England or Newell? Again, help! Anybody.

The chief advantage of having a living prophet is that he can, under inspiration, give us new commandments, which in their own time, are equally or perhaps more valid than our previous understanding. If we disregard new instructions, are we any different from those who reject the initial gospel message or those who refuse to accept the Woodruff Manifesto ending the practice of polygamy. And, as President Benson has usefully reminded us, only the living prophet is authorized to receive such new marching orders for the Church as a whole. If we depend on our own past sense of right and wrong, as Newell suggests, it may help avoid future Mai Lai's and Nuremburg war crimes trials, but, it would seem, it will never secure our celestial exaltation.

The Gods are above moral law as we know it and are constrained only by what is good for the majority in the longest of long runs. They are free to adopt the manners and means, tactics and strategies necessary to put down evil wherever it is found, though they have found by experience that absolute free agency must be preserved in order to assure a crop of inherently "good" souls who are entirely self-directed, uninfluenced by thoughts of reward or punishment, and beyond the influence of flattery or egotism.

Here below, however, God periodically shifts moral guidelines, sometimes radically, as part of his tactical war against Satan: "take plural wives; be immovably faithful to one wife; don't take human life except after raising the banner of freedom four times and parlaying with your enemy before attack"; while in other circumstances he says, "kill Laban in cold blood and without warning because 'it is better for one man to perish than for a nation to dwindle in unbelief.'" (With a similar,

but different scenario he commands Abraham to leave Terah because of the practice of human sacrifice, then later commands him to sacrifice his own son Isaac). And when, as David Buerger reports, (DIALOGUE 16 [Spring 1983]) we can hardly wait for our calling and election to be made sure to give us a mid-course reading on how we are doing because second anointings haven't been practiced in any significant number since the 1920s, what are we to do?

As deputy director of the State Department Office of Intelligence and Research, tasked with drafting the U.S. Position Papers for the International Women's Year in 1976, I experienced some internal conflict over approving U.S. support for radical family planning programs — but reconciled myself by studying all past First Presidency statements regarding family planning and finding that they were directly solely to Church members. Since that time, the words, "what we say to the Church we say to all the world," have been added. But my watch was over by that time.

As an American and proponent of American-style political freedom, I find myself in sympathy with the Newell position. As a political scientist and retired career diplomat, I recognize, however, that the American approach is not the only, nor necessarily the most desirable, approach in many other cultures. Newell theorizes that we are dealing with known quantities: unchanging notions of right and wrong, invariable guidelines to truth.

But, as England adds, the real world is neither so simple nor so constant. Not only God but nations must at times take extraordinary steps to confront unanticipated events. And the current conflict between Congress and the president over who is ultimately in charge of the nation's foreign affairs and whether or not it is lawful and right to fight the fire of unprincipled adversaries with equivalent backfire, is a case in point. This is the line adopted by the moral absolutists of most "main line" Christian churches today. Mormonism, on the other hand, has historically

chosen to trust God's judgment rather than man's, thus putting us in the downright uncomfortable situation of placing ourselves in the hands of even a trusted prophet, who may tell us to go against our deepest and most indwelling concepts of right and wrong.

This can present moral dilemmas of the first order. Remember Oliver Cowdery, who parted company with Joseph Smith over the notion of the Church's voting as a block, Brigham Young, who reported night sweats over accepting the doctrine of plural marriage, and many (including my great-grandfather, Robert Thornley) who couldn't countenance Porter Rockwell as bodyguard (and, some say with pretty good circumstantial evidence, executioner) to Brigham Young. Yet Rockwell died in his bed, while, faced with the aftermath of the Mountain Meadows Massacre, Brigham

threw his own adopted son, John D. Lee, to the federal authorities, accepting his execution while promising "restoration of all blessings" after his death. Ouch! What faith that took.

What position should we take? Loyalty to the Church president (as President Benson has invited), to "all the Brethren" as per Joseph Smith (that has been hard even for some apostles, as we have recently read in *DIALOGUE* concerning Moses Thatcher), or to the "still small voice" of our own conscience — which seems sufficient guide for Jack Newell. I hope some of *DIALOGUE*'s wise heads can bring further enlightenment through your "Letters to the Editor" column. I remain ambivalent and fear for my salvation.

David Brighton Timmins
Laredo, Texas