

LETTERS

Those Good Old Days

I was deeply touched by Claudia Bushman's evocative and nostalgic piece on Sunset Ward (Summer 1989). It brought back warm memories and feelings about my own boyhood in the old Oakland Ward chapel across San Francisco Bay on MacArthur Boulevard, a building of similar vintage, concept, and amenities (though a bit downscale in the latter, since we were more of a working-class ward!). Perhaps modesty led Claudia to avoid mentioning that the persistent, long-suffering, and inventive Bishop Lauper in her piece was, of course, her own father! Thanks so much, Claudia, for taking me back to those good old days of pioneering California Mormons, if only for a while!

Armand L. Mauss
Pullman, Washington

The Stumbling Block

As I sit trying to concentrate on my studies, my mind keeps wandering to the excommunication of George P. Lee and the resulting implications for future Church relations with the Lamanites. Of course I don't know all the details surrounding Elder Lee's excommunication, and perhaps there are things that I shouldn't know. But this much I do know: Elder Lee's denunciation of racism in the Church is desperately needed.

Being blessed with the mark of Laman, I have wrestled firsthand with the racist assumptions of the Latter-day Saints I grew up with. As a child I listened in sacrament meeting to fervent prayers on behalf of my people, then heard on Mondays these same members discourage their children from becoming close friends with me ("doors may be closed to them"). On the walls of my Sunday school class, I saw pictures of a white-looking Jesus holding blond children. My seminary teachers taught that the more righteous my ancestors were, the whiter they became, and that someday I too would become "white and delightful." During my teenage years girlfriends told me that their parents were strongly encouraging them to date more "acceptable" boys. Today my Mormon friends laugh at ethnic jokes and then tell me: "But we don't think of you like that." If I talk about my heritage or show pride in my family and ethnicity, my Latter-day Saint friends shift uncomfortably. Yet if I ever suggested to these same friends that they were racist, they would be hurt and offended.

The events surrounding Elder Lee's excommunication, in many ways, characterize my personal struggle with Anglo Mormons. On the one hand, I applaud Elder Lee for standing up for his convictions and denouncing hypocrisy no matter where it is found. If this Church is to be the means in which the ancient prophecies made to the children of Lehi will be

realized, why then are so few Lamanites in the upper hierarchy of Church leadership to direct that realization?

Yet while I rejoice at his denunciation of sin, I also mourn for Elder Lee and for all the descendents of father Lehi who hoped that someday he might help remove the walls of discrimination that now line the corridors of Church authority. How courageous Elder Lee was, and yet how unfortunate it was for all of us that he chose to remove himself, however distanced he might have felt, from the seat of power where he could have done the most good. Now his ministry of "long-suffering, gentleness and meekness, and love unfeigned" will not be felt where it is perhaps needed the most. I wonder, had I been in his situation, if I could have followed the patient example of the sons of Mosiah instead of challenging a leadership already sensitive to internal criticism and the influence of "alternate voices."

I mourn most of all for the Church authorities, who through the ignorance of instinct, reacted to preserve a facade of infallibility instead of listening as humble children. We all struggle with racism. We all need to repent. Like the Nephites of old who rejected the harsh message of Samuel, the General Authorities seemed to have grown weary of Elder Lee's cry for repentance and expelled him from their presence for telling them what they did not want to hear. Too many in the Church, I fear, will also dismiss Elder Lee's frustration with Anglo Mormons and simply shake their heads in bewilderment, quoting that oft-repeated phrase that insulates the Church from internal criticism: "Even the very elect will be deceived." The Church—leaders as well as the members—could open so many doors if only it would let go of unconscious racism. Yet as a Church we must first open our eyes to see the stumbling block before us. The

controversy surrounding Elder Lee indicates that the Church is content to keep its eyes squeezed shut for a while longer.

Eduardo Pagán
Princeton, New Jersey

The Wrong Dialogue

When I received my Fall 1989 issue of *Dialogue*, I spent almost an hour studying the cover. The images are vivid, but the mood is unsettling. I anticipated a dialogue about combat and a roundtable discussion of "The Mormon and the Military." I hunted for articles on "The Mormon Authoritarian Heritage" and "The Theological Basis for War." I searched for the veterans' equivalent of Ed Firmage's empathetic voice of "Reconciliation."

I finally decided that (1) I had the wrong cover on my *Dialogue* or (2) I had the wrong *Dialogue* in my cover. Either way I was somewhat disappointed. I hope you are planning a future volume that will address the lingering issues that Andrew Whitlock's photography has rekindled in many of us.

Bryce C. Thueson
The Woodlands, Texas

Shame on Mecham

As a black member of the Church, I read with interest Karen Coates's "The Holy War Surrounding Evan Mecham" and Alleen Pace Nilsen's "Evan Mecham: Humor in Arizona Politics" (Fall 1989).

As far as I am concerned, Governor Mecham was a racist and a disgrace to the Church and to the state of Arizona. Much of what he said was crude and ignorant and did a disservice to Mormonism.

The fact that some Latter-day Saints actually supported him shows just how far my brothers and sisters have to go to reach the iron rod.

Perhaps we could dismiss Mecham as merely a joke, but his conduct has damaged the Church and brought shame on the LDS community.

Ehab Abunuwara's "Nothing Holy: A Different Perspective of Israel" is the most moving work that has appeared in *Dialogue* in years, and as an African-American, I can feel the pain of his words.

Joseph A. Walkes, Jr.
Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas

Silencing Needed Voices

With others I ponder George P. Lee's situation, as I try to assess my own guilt. Perhaps the entire Church membership needs to look inward toward its own culpability.

Several experiences flash into consciousness.

As the granddaughter of Sanpete County pioneers, I knew something about the ambiguity of the Black Hawk War. But we were a book-loving family, so I also grew up with Hiawatha. Moreover, between the sliding doors which separated the parlor from the dining room in our Provo home lay a handsome Navajo rug, its importance set off by its central place in the furnishings.

In 1924, after graduating from BYU, I taught school in Kanab. Periodically, small groups of Indians filtered into town. The men, eyes enigmatic, carried rolls of blankets over their shoulders. The women, often with babies on their backs, walked soberly behind.

Someday, I hoped, I would marry and have a home of my own, also centered with

a Navajo rug. Here was my opportunity.

I do not remember whether transactions took place near the town's business block, but I do remember that there was no aggressive sales pitch. The blankets were presented without guile. And I now realize for little money. However, because my salary was one hundred dollars a month, buying the rugs seemed a large investment.

Eventually, I did marry. Our home for thirty years in Delaware had been built in 1820 of Delaware granite. A huge wood-burning fireplace in the living room came complete with crane and a wrought-iron cooking pot. On the random-width, yellow pine floor lay my Navajo rugs, both dignified and exuberant.

It was my habit, periodically, to lay them across the picnic table for a shampoo of dry suds. On one such occasion, a storm was rolling in. The sky darkened. Lightning and thunder heralded a coming rain. Meadow grasses exuded that particular earthy perfume which welcomes wetness.

Suddenly, I knew the woman, hundreds of miles away, who had woven my rugs. In that moment of bonding I assured her that I treasured her handicraft, and I thanked her for sharing with me her understanding in design of great life forces.

Another memory is darker.

After my husband retired, we moved to a small Utah town where many families were participating in the Indian Placement Program. One of the ward "pillars" and his foster son were evening sacrament meeting participants. It may have been for a priesthood advancement ceremony.

At any rate, the boy spoke first, adequately but quietly. Then his foster father rose to commend him. He concluded his remarks with these words: "If he continues to make progress, he may someday be white and delightful."

Did anyone in the congregation flinch? Is "red" not beautiful? Or did the Saints feel that as custodians of the truth they were entitled to clone?

Recently one remembers the guarded eyes of Indians at the Utah State Prison. Often alcoholics with unfulfilled potential, they were driven *publicly* to plead for a sweat lodge.

Why do we so seldom listen to insights voiced by minorities?

At the very time that the media played up George Lee's story, I received from the Wider Quaker Fellowship one of their periodic mailings of inspirational pamphlets. Among these was Chief Seattle's Lament, *The Land Is Sacred to Us*. He says in part:

The Great Chief in Washington sends word that he wishes to buy our land. The Great Chief also sends us words of friendship and goodwill. This is kind of him, since we know he has little need for our friendship in return. . . .

Every part of this earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every clearing, and humming insect is holy in the memory and experience of my people. The sap which courses through the trees carries the memories of the red man. . . .

This we know: The earth does not belong to man; man belongs to the earth. This we know: All things are connected like the blood which unites one family. All things are connected.

Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons of the earth. Man did not weave the web of life; he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself. . . .

Alas, we silence needed voices.

In our white pride, why does judgment so often tip toward discipline? Why does it so seldom lean toward openness and compassion?

Helen Candland Stark
Provo, Utah