A Voice from the Fire: The Authority of Experience

Colleen C. Bernhard
Brigham Young University - Provo

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A Voice from the Fire:
the Authority of Experience

A Thesis
Presented to the
Department of English
Brigham Young University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Colleen Campion Bernhard

December 1996
This thesis by Colleen Campion Bernhard is accepted in its present form by the
Department of English of Brigham Young University as satisfying the thesis requirement
for the degree of Master of Arts.

Louise Plummer
Louise Plummer, Committee Chair

George Eugene England, Committee Member

Susan Howe
Susan Howe, Committee Member

Date
Dec 5, 1994

Jesse S. Crisler, Graduate Coordinator
"I am a daughter of a Heavenly Father that loves me, and I love Him. I will stand as a witness of God at all times and in all things and in all places." This is not idle rhetoric to me. It is absolutely synonomous with "I will stand as a witness of the truth at all times and in all things and in all places." According to the scriptures of the Restoration, the Spirit of Truth is Christ Himself. I have given myself up as sincerely and as wholly as a mortal can to Him, to His Spirit. I do not, I will not lie. Neither will I pretend anything. Pretending is only a sugarcoated name for lying. When we take the witness stand we swear to tell "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God." I, too, am determined to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. For this reason I pray, "So, help me, God."
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INTRODUCTION

A Ramble of My Own

The essayist, unlike the novelist, the poet, and the playwright, must be content in his self-imposed role of second class citizen... A writer who has his sights trained on the Nobel Prize or other earthly triumphs had best write a novel, a poem, or a play, and leave the essayist to ramble about, content with living a free life and enjoying the satisfactions of a somewhat undisciplined existence.\(^1\)

I came into my master’s program two years ago, a personal essayist by nature but not by education. My journey to the culmination of this thesis has been a sort of drawn out rendition of Tarzan’s belated identity crisis, “Me, Tarzan?” In the spirit of the true essayist, I had no clue as to where my “walkabout”\(^2\) in the field of English studies would take me, and to this hour I still struggle with coming to closure. I’m not sure closure is part of an essayist’s psychic paradigm.

I spent the first semester of my M.A. program in early British literature for no good reason except that I knew I loved Shakespeare, iambic pentameter, and the King James Edition of the Bible. By my second semester I knew I was actually more fascinated with the “psychology” behind the use of language than with literature itself, so I transferred my emphasis to rhetoric. In rhetoric, though, I still could not feel settled. I found myself incurably self-reflective and subjective. While others around me were budding and blossoming into master scholars—reveling in hours of research, thrilled with accumulating references from canonical and institutional icons—I found myself producing pages of single-spaced personal reflections and reactions to as little as one sentence from the authors and texts we studied. I was embarrassed by my “egotism,” and tried hard to be a true scholar. It would be nearly two years before I would find my way to Samuel Johnson’s explanation for my dilemma: The essayist . . . seldom harasses [her] reason
with long trains of consequences, dims [her] eye with the perusal of antiquated volumes, or burthens [her] memory with great accumulations of preparatory knowledge.³

No matter how hard I tried to keep my reflections and opinions to myself, I found it impossible not to want to speak up and share my thoughts on any and every subject we discussed in class. I had no idea, then, that I was, according to Mikhail Bakhtin’s words quoted by Peter Elbow, just awakening to my own voice, my own authority: One’s own discourse and one’s own voice, although born of another or dynamically stimulated by another, will sooner or later begin to liberate themselves from the authority of the other’s discourse.⁴

As the months passed I realized that I was gaining the greatest education I could ever hope to obtain. I was coming to know me—my mind, my heart, my opinions—an accomplishment that, admittedly, at forty-eight, was long overdue. I take solace in the promise of Christ’s parable of the laborers coming to the vineyard both early and late and being rewarded alike. I can only trust that getting to know me and my own “I-am” this late in life will be that much sweeter for the wait.

Two years ago, as a single-parent with five of my twelve children still to raise and with minimal child support from my ex-husband, I couldn’t be distracted learning about something as “tangential to the marketplace”⁵ as myself. I had to prepare myself to earn “a living.” Somehow, though, my education was already revealing my own truth to me: “a living” wasn’t something I needed to earn but something I needed to be; that “living” was meant to be a verb, not a noun. But where in the academy could I find an environment conducive to such self-expression?
When I took my first creative writing (518R) class, it was just as an elective, a lark. I had to ask for special permission from my professor, Leslie Norris, since I had never had any undergraduate creative writing courses. Luckily he had been my instructor in a previous class on the Romantic period in England and had watched me come to tears in class over Blake, Wordsworth and Coleridge. He’d also worked with me directly in preparing a paper on John Donne for an undergraduate literature conference. I think he knew how desperate I was to find a place where the only endnote I needed for my work was my own byline.

As the first half of that semester passed, I sat through the other students’ reading of their own poetry, short stories, chapters from budding novels, and screen-plays. I was awed by the collective talent around me and began to feel more and more like a stranger in a strange land. I could not produce thoughts as crystalized and succinct as the poets, though I thrilled to the freedom they took in their “associative leaps” of metaphor and insight. (Later, I was to learn the personal essayist enjoys the same freedom in prose.) Neither could I identify with fiction. I found that I was just as jealous to be the main character and the narrator in my own creative work as I had been jealous to be the single source in my academic work. My experience and my authority cried out to be acknowledged and shared, not veiled in someone else’s name or character—either fictional or factual. I was definitely developing a sense of “vocation,” though not in the modern, materialistic sense. No, this vocation was the kind I had read about in Scott Peck’s *A World Waiting to Be Born:*

The word *vocation* literally means “calling” . . . which may or may not coincide with one’s occupation, with what one is actually doing.
In this sense vocation implies a relationship. For if someone is called, something must be doing the calling... so also may some [people] spend years—even a lifetime—fleeing their true vocation... in either some kind of fear of failure or fear of success or both. ... So God's unique vocation for each of us invariably calls us to personal success, but not necessarily success in the world's stereotypical terms or means of measurement.

It was not until midterm interviews, one-on-one, that I confessed my dilemma to Professor Norris. Haltingly I admitted to him what I am sure his sense of “vocation” had already told him—that the two poems and the several attempts at fiction I had handed in so far were not my forte. In one sentence he nailed me. “You’re a personal essayist.” He smiled warmly and continued, “Which doesn’t surprise me. The personal essay is the genre of Mormonism because of its investment in subjective, personal experience. Subjective, highly personal experience is the very heart of your religion.”

The rest of the semester went more smoothly for me as I reworked a couple of Bombeck-like pieces I had written several years before. I still wasn’t brave enough, though, to let go and create brand-new material from my current life experience. I wasn’t sure how to write about the drastic turn my life had taken in recent years.

The next semester I took a second creative writing course, determined to hold my own in the midst of the poets and short story writers. But I still wasn’t sure I belonged. Then God arranged what Peck calls a “graceful intervention,”11 which set my feet squarely on the path of the personal essayist.

Phillip Lopate, who had just written a highly acclaimed and definitive work on the personal essay, The Art of the Personal Essay, came to Brigham Young University and to my 518R class. Enthralled, I followed him from my class to another class and to his afternoon reading. I probably would have followed him home if I’d had the airfare.
Instead I invested in his book. As I read, I wept with relief to find permission to own my own style—vernacular, conversational, intimately honest; my own genre—personal, self-revelatory, rambling, tentative, not complete; in other words—in my own voice. By the end of that semester I knew where I belonged, where I was called, for better or worse. I changed my emphasis one last time to creative writing and began to explore the personal essay as a tradition I deeply identified with.

Exploring the Tradition

The personal essay reminds us of our own and others’ humanity. Its egalitarian nature comes from its intention not to attempt to constrain its subject or to subdue its audience, but to render as truly as possible the confluence of impressions and reflections which shape one’s thought.12

In The Art of the Personal Essay, Phillip Lopate raises the question whether the personal essay is really a genre or merely a tradition.13 I found in my own research, as Carl H. Klaus admits in the opening paragraph of his paper “Essayists on the Essay,” that the MLA Bibliography is strangely silent on the essay, that its “boundaries, its terrain, its deep interior [is] a place few scholars had chosen to visit.”14 Klaus even goes so far as to propose it as an “anti-genre,” “whose distinguishing characteristic is its freedom from any governing aspect of form.”15 It demands and delights to take any form it chooses.

As I tried to trace the essay’s history, I found that though the essay had some pretty illustrious names in its genealogy—Montaigne, Bacon, Stevenson, Woolf, to name just a few—it had almost disappeared from literary consideration by the middle of the twentieth century. In its resistance to method and form the personal essay nearly made itself extinct in literary circles. While fiction boomed in the last half of the century, nonfiction struggled to free itself from the image of a “bastard child, a second class
citizen,”\textsuperscript{16} by changing its name to the “paper,” the “article,” and even the “piece.” The word “essay” was avoided “with horror,” according to Joseph Krutch.\textsuperscript{17}

Then, as the influences of deconstructionist theory caused academics to look beneath historic assumptions of authority and objectivity, the truth had to be admitted—for all the abhorrence of the personal singular pronoun “I”, all writing is situated, personal and subjective. No matter how many established authorities I cite to make my point, it is still my point I’m making.

In the last several decades, as a new age of spiritual awakening has rebounded from the unfulfilled promises of humanism and the scientific method, even more energy has gathered to empower the blatantly honest “tradition” of the personal essay. Gradually, it is experiencing a recovery that promises to be phenomenal.

A Woman’s Place in the Tradition

Until recently, it was easier for women writers either to conceal themselves behind their characters in novels and plays or to fight against the tyranny of men in polemical treatises than to adopt the light irony or immodestly confessional self-exposure of the personal essayist. . . . Fortunately the modern era has seen women writers adopting the essay form more and more, helping to revive it, transforming its concerns, and at times giving it a different sound.\textsuperscript{18}

During that second semester, while I studied the traditional parameters of the personal essay, I also received my first exposure to feminism in a class on contemporary literary theory. I could not help but be struck by the similarities I heard between the characteristics of the personal essay and of the feminine literary voice.

Scattered throughout Lopate’s introduction I found the following descriptors for the essay: it is intimate, diverting, approachable; it is based on relationship and a sense of dialogue; it has a drive towards candor, self disclosure, ambivalence—changing positions
and opinions at will. It struggles aloud for self-understanding, for honesty, in front of the reader. It honors and delights in the details of life, finding meaning in the most humble object, event, or circumstance. It does not present itself as the authority on anything except what the author is saying. It is an expression among equals. It is not being written to declare any conclusion or convince anyone but simply to explore and share one’s thoughts. It is an attempt to birth ideas and then let them go to find their own destiny, their own merit.

As a woman just emerging from a multigenerational familial tradition of misogyny and silence, my heart leaped up! I felt like getting out a soap box and a bull-horn. Writing women, come forth! Come out from behind your fictional characters; come out from the cloistered confines of diaries, journals, and letters! Take up your own life, your own voice, your own opinion! Take up the personal essay!

Then I looked around and realized that women are taking up the personal essay, living and writing in the first person singular in ways that are both gratifying and disturbing to me. First I found and read the writing of the women Lopate named—Woolf, Fisher, Dillard, McCarthy, Rich. Then I sought newer voices and found Maya Angelou, Terry Tempest Williams, and Erica Jong writing autobiographical essays. Whetting my appetite on Woolf’s and Dillard’s book-length essays on the writing life, I went on to find further encouragement in the advice of Natalie Goldberg, Madeleine L’Engle, Brenda Ueland, and Burghild Nina Holzer. Upon reading the opinion of Lopate that inspirational and self-help books are really “collections of personal essays strung together,” I realized I had actually been reading the work of women essayists for years—Catherine Marshall, Marianne Williamson, Clarissa Pinkola Estes, Melody Beattie, and Chieko Okazaki.
Essay Writing As a Therapeutic Tool

The self-consciousness and self-reflection that essay writing demands cannot help but have an influence on the personal essayist's life. . . . Thus the writing of personal essays not only monitors the self but helps it to gel. The essay is an enactment of the creation of self. 20

As I mentioned earlier, my interest in English has actually been a thinly disguised interest in the source of language—the human heart and mind. While finishing my undergraduate work and participating in graduate studies in English, I have studied psychology and the phenomenon usually referred to as spirituality. Formally, I pursued a minor in psychology and completed all the course work at University of Utah to qualify as a Certified Addictions Counselor. Informally, I read the works of Carl G. Jung, Erik H. Erikson, A.H. Maslow, William James, and Viktor E. Frankl as well as many contemporary voices—M. Scott Peck, Alice Miller and others. My driving passion has been to understand and facilitate in myself and others the change that reaches to one's very core, that affects one's very nature. I know it happens. I have witnessed it and I have lived it.

In all of my study I have found no method, tool, or technique more powerful to affect this degree of change than the tool of language—especially written language.

When, in Cecil B. DeMill's The Ten Commandments Yul Brenner as the pharaoh plants his feet firmly, folds his arms across his chest and declares, "So let it be written. So let it be done!" I've always gotten goose-flesh—a sure witness to me that I am in the presence of a truth I need to pay wholehearted attention to. When Hugh Nibley testifies that the ability to write is of divine origin and "remains and probably always will remain, the most effective means of binding time and space," 21 something deep in my psyche stands up and
takes note. I “burn” inside with that sense of knowing the truth of something I have no
intellectual, rational reason to know.

I believe it is by this highly subjective sense of truth that all people live or die, and
I have found no more effective means of getting down to this depth of honesty than the
written word. According to Lopate, “The struggle for honesty is central to the ethos of
the personal essay.” According to God, the struggle to align ourselves with truth is the
ethos of our entire life. As far as I can see, the process of essaying and living are one and
the same thing.

While working as a lay-counselor with people who have become willing to practice
this degree of honesty, I have been quick to introduce writing as a tool for both therapy
and personal revelation. I have watched individuals literally rescript their past and their
future through writing essays about particular persons, places, circumstances or events of
their lives—not changing facts—but reinterpreting the facts they recall. The essay has
proven to be an easier form of life-writing for many who feel overwhelmed by a
commitment to daily diary or journal keeping. They are usually willing to accept essay
assignments—which I call “capturing”—skeptically at first and then with growing
enthusiasm.

I have taught people to “capture” from both scriptural and secular sources by
copying a quote at the top of a journal or notebook page and then writing “to the quote.”
By exploring every thought, they can essay (test) their own feelings and insights as
triggered by the text they are reading. This sense of dialoguing with the text has the effect
of digesting and internalizing the concepts thus “discussed.” It gives people practice in
owning their own self, their own choices, their own responsibilities. To write a personal
essay is an act of response. It demonstrates to a person that he or she has the ability to respond. I have taught, both by example\textsuperscript{23} and precept, the power of the personal essay as a vehicle to bring sanity and clarity to an otherwise confusing life experience. As Lopate states, “So often the plot of the personal essay, its drama, its suspense, consists in watching how far the essayist can drop past his or her psychic defenses toward deeper levels of honesty.”\textsuperscript{24}

I believe that essaying, this process of dropping past one’s “psychic defenses,” when done with sincere acknowledgment of the limits of human experience and the need of Divine grace and guidance, is actually the shedding of “the creeds of the [parents], who have inherited lies.”\textsuperscript{25} Essaying can thus be used to put people in touch with the source of \textit{all life and all light}, even “the Spirit of truth.”\textsuperscript{26}

I have a great desire to continue writing and publishing in the genre of the essay, thus promoting its immense power for healing, for sanity, and for community. I hope to carry the message that it can be a bridge for other voiceless frightened people to cross over so that they, too, don’t have to die dumb.

The Personal Essay in Mormon Tradition

When Leslie Norris remarked to me in my first creative writing class that the personal essay is \textit{the} genre of Mormonism, he also expressed his surprise that it doesn’t receive more attention from us. I did not say then what I still find reason to believe—that of all the literary genres, the personal essay probably has the least hope of reaching full flower in the LDS culture. I can sum my trepidation up in five words, each one representing a section heading in Phillip Lopate’s introduction to \textit{The Art of the Personal Essay: Confession},\textsuperscript{27} \textit{Contrariety},\textsuperscript{28} \textit{Egotism},\textsuperscript{29} \textit{Cheek},\textsuperscript{30} and \textit{Idler}.
I have experienced little in our culture to convince me that there is sufficient tolerance among most Latter-day Saints for the qualities represented by these section headings. J. B. Priestley, as quoted by Phillip Lopate, made the statement that “the secret of writing a good essay is to let oneself go.” 32 “To let oneself go” is not looked on with much approval in the LDS culture. To ramble, explore, wonder, or question—all characteristics of the personal essay—is only allowed up to a point. Once that point is reached the wonderer is often considered an incurable wanderer.

Lopate’s statement about “contrariety” demonstrates another way the personal essayist risks being caught between two conflicting traditions. “It is often the case that personal essayists intentionally go against the grain of popular opinion.” 33 Unfortunately, “popular opinion” often masquerades as “member teachings” in the Mormon culture, and to “go against” them is often deadly to one’s fellowship in our community.

Lopate also states that “personal essayists are adept at interrogating their ignorance.”34 I am not sure a Mormon who admits ignorance, much less interrogates it publicly, will ever find a popular audience among her own people, who generally shun admittance of ignorance, foolishness, fear, sin, or trial. Heaven forbids—at least according to one of our most cherished “member teachings”—anything like public confession, even though the scriptures advise and model the opposite.35

Despite these reservations, however, I still agree with Eugene England’s statement that “it is the personal essay that seems to me to have the greatest potential for making a uniquely valuable Mormon contribution both to Mormon cultural and religious life and to that of others.” 36 But the only way Mormon essayists will accomplish this is to exercise one of the essay’s greatest characteristics—to “walk around the elephant” and tell the
whole truth. I have come to realize that nothing speaks to another’s soul—body and spirit—more than for me to speak from my soul or wholeness. Nothing does more to ignite and fan the fires of honesty in another than to be honest in front of them. As children of God, creatures of light and truth ourselves,37 we lean toward the truth.38 It is our primary, most primordial character,39 though it may be buried beneath physical and psychological challenges inherited from our mortal parentage and societal paradigms. I believe there has been a tendency in Mormon essayists and writers generally to seek either one pole or the other—emphasizing either the temporal perspective or the eternal. But, just as “neither is the man without the woman [or life without death, or dark without light] . . . in the Lord,”40 so too must great literature be a compound-in-one of both halves of the whole truth. Like Don Quixote, “this is my quest” and my star—to tell the whole truth: that God is greater to redeem and to repair and make right again than I am to screw things up. Time doesn’t heal everything. God heals everything in time.41

I also enjoy and find encouragement in the works of Mormon authors in other literary genres. For example, I long to develop and exercise in the personal essay the ability to “[explore] Mormon thought and culture in a critical but fundamentally affirmative way”42 attributed to Professor Doug Thayer. I resonate to Carol Lynn Pearson’s courage in autobiographical writing, not to mention her poetry and playwriting. I cannot think of a more delightful—as in full of light—voice than Hugh Nibley’s. I long to emulate to the best of my ability his fearless combination of personal consecration and candor. Here again, is my ideal of the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

According to Lopate, one of the attributes of a good personal essayist is that he or she is skilled at “locating a tension between two valid, opposing goals, or a partial virtue
in some apparent ill, or an ambivalence in his own belief system." I believe that there is enough grace in the gospel of the Christ—who did not reject a man’s honest admittance of simultaneous belief and unbelief—to allow such exploration of the discrepancy between our theology and our culture, our principles and ourselves.

In other words, humble and late to the vineyard as my efforts may be, I intend to add my voice to other Latter-day Saint writers who favor and even champion literary non-fiction in the form of the personal essay. I believe that my life’s experiences coupled with my education—as a writer and eventually as a Ph.D. in Family Life and Human Development—will give me a powerful base from which to contribute to “a literature to match the high religious achievement of the Restoration Joseph Smith began.” I believe my familiarity with the inner fires of both martyrdom and rapture supplies me with the kind of dual or compound perspective Brigham Young described as quoted by Eugene England, “We cannot obtain eternal life unless we actually know and comprehend by our experience the principle of good and the principle of evil, the light and the darkness, truth, virtue, and holiness, also vice, wickedness, and corruption.”

In this same spirit, it is my opinion that Latter-day Saints are capable of writing the greatest personal essays in the world—essays that have redemptive as well as recreational value. As Professor England pointed out in his foundational article, “Progress and Prospects,” in our theology we have “sufficient matter with which to produce a great literature.” According to England, the deficiency we deal with is our generally shallow theological literacy combined with our lack of insight into the “means of literature.” It is my intent to continue to do all I can in the future to overcome this deficiency in myself as a Mormon personal essayist.
This thesis definitely represents a beginning worthy of a lifelong commitment. It has been a rite of passage for me into a level of public performance and confidence that I might never have attained without such a goal. It has required me to believe in myself and in my voice.

**Autobiographical vs. Memoiristic**

Drawing heavily from a lifetime of journals, I have chosen to emphasize two forms of the personal essay—the more “classical” autobiographical form and also a form that Phillip Lopate describes as “memoiristic.”

According to Lopate, the personal essay does not have to be light. I too, believe and trust that the essay can be weighted with the whole truth, not just the pretty side. There are some, perhaps who would accuse me of getting too honest, too intimate, too familiar with these essays, but I believe, as Joseph Krutch put it, “one man’s ‘familiar essay’ on love and marriage might get closer to some all-important realities than any number of ‘studies’ could.” I am convinced that the personal essay is a genre that is capable of demonstrating that life is, as 2 Nephi 2:11 states, a glorious, terrifying, painful, joyful compound-in-all-things.

**Autobiographical**

I consider the three essays in this section “classical” as well as autobiographical for several very loose and easy reasons. First, they are what Lopate would call “ruminative.” Second, they circle around one particular autobiographical circumstance, squeezing all possible meaning out of it.” Third, they reflect a “strong moral conviction,” which Lopate insists I must couple with “a frank, shaded account of [my]
Hopefuly, they convey that "shiver of recognition" which Lopate claims all essay readers look for.

While these three pieces have a strong autobiographical bent, lapsing into narrative elements, they also retain the reflective qualities of the classic essay.

Memoiristic:

According to Phillip Lopate’s definition, a memoiristic essay is more narrative than "ruminative." It tells the story of one’s life without stopping for much reflection or processing. As Douglas Hesse stated, “Narrative essays don’t prove points, . . . Points are events in the essay as a story.” It casts the author’s “I” as a fellow character in the narrative, caught in the conflict along with others. I sought to accomplish this through the use of what are traditionally considered fictional devices—dialogue, character development, detailed description. I use this form deliberately, seeking to relive these events as vividly as possible, both for my own catharsis as well as to do all I can to "bring to light the hidden things of darkness" in our culture as a whole. I believe with all my heart that there is "much that lies in futurity pertaining to the Saints” that depends on just such heart-deep cleansing of our families’ histories. Each of these three essays represents a tiny glimpse of the terrifying collapse of a “just fine” Mormon family, consumed from within by the fires of secret sin hidden in the hearts of its members. Mercifully, the essays, give more of a strobe-light effect than a long, sustained look at the holocaust that continues to smolder and burn even to this day.
Notes


5 Lopate, xxxiii.


8 Ibid., 62.

9 Ibid., 63.

10 Ibid., 67.

11 Ibid., 77.


13 Lopate, *Art.,* xxiii.


15 Ibid., 160.


22 Lopate, *Art*, xxv.

23 I have edited and published a monthly newsletter called *Heartbeats* since 1991, providing an outlet for myself and others to share our recovery centered writing.

24 Lopate, *Art*, xxv.


26 D&C 93:11.

27 Lopate, *Art*, xxv.

28 Ibid., xxviii.

29 Ibid., xxxi.

30 Ibid., xxxii.

31 Ibid., xxxiii.

32 Ibid., xlviii.

33 Ibid., xxx

34 Ibid., xxvii.

35 D&C 59:12, 2 Nephi 4:18.

37 D&C 93:23.

38 D&C 88:44.


40 1 Corinthians 11:11.

41 D&C 50:40-42.

42 England, 473.

43 Lopate, *Art*, xxvii.

44 Mark 9:24.

45 England, 483.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid., 460.


49 Krutch as quoted in Klaus, 163.


51 Lopate, *Art*, xxix.

52 Ibid., xxvii.

53 Ibid., xxvi.


57 D&C 123:15.
Autobiographical
A Voice from the Fire

When writing about real life, I never cease to struggle with the problem of where to begin and where to end. This dilemma does as much to convince me of life’s infinite nature as any religious dogma.

The other day I lamented to a close friend, "Trying to find the time in my life to write is like being a war correspondent writing under fire—with bombs falling everywhere." She entirely missed my play for sympathy. She laughed instead, "Remember—that’s how the ‘Star Spangled Banner’ was written.”

Writing under fire. I muse on the words.

*My heart was hot within me, while I was musing the fire burned.*¹

I wonder if writing under fire could be compared to trying to breathe under water. It’s kind of hard not to get some of it down your throat and want to cough it up.

*I will make my words in thy mouth fire*²

Have you ever noticed how once a fire begins it doesn’t ask permission or apologize for the shape and size it takes. Give it an inch and it’ll take a mile. Give it a twig and it’ll take the forest. And it all begins with just a little smoke in tender places.

I love to sit and watch flames in a fireplace or campfire. Here, they shimmer along the edge of a log, a line of light bearly standing above its surface. In another place they leap and fall back. Big, little. Here, there. Bursting into existence out of thin air, literally, then disappearing in an instant. Under these circumstances, flames are so warm. So comforting. So fascinating. So harnassed. Watching so much fearsome power stay so
tenuously within bounds can be mesmerizing. And when the flame’s dance of leaping, licking energy overwhelms my senses I stare instead into the white hot space at the center of the criss-crossed logs where the tinder first began to smoke. Now the coals, there, glow as if they are alive with a glory that has purged them of all physical substance. Still, they keep their form as if they are the last to know they are being consumed—transformed into pure energy. Reduced to ashes.

Annie Dillard once wrote, “When you write, you lay out a line of words. The line of words is a miner’s pick, a wood-carver’s gouge, a surgeon’s probe. You wield it, and it digs a path you follow.” I’d like to offer from my experience one more metaphor for this “line of words” that picks, gouges, and probes. It is a line of fire that I cannot seem to avoid, no matter how hard I try. It penetrates my heart.

Fire changes things. Absolutely, molecularly.

Writing under fire does the same thing.

2

And now when the flames began to scorch him, he cried unto them . . .

I’m finally coming to realize that victimization and martyrdom have only one distinguishing difference: a martyr is a victim with a message; a victim is a martyr without a voice.

From an eternal perspective, there is no tragedy in martyrdom. Usually, it represents the unfolding of a preordained destiny. And in the process of fulfilling that destiny, the martyr finds herself blessed with a foretaste of exaltation as she discovers she is not alone in her suffering, . . .
My God hath sent his angel, and hath shut the lions' mouths,  
that they have not hurt me.5

and that God has no fear of fire.

He answered and said, Lo, I see four men loose, walking in the midst  
of the fire, . . . the fourth is like the Son of God.6

The tragedy of victimization, in contrast, is that the sacrifice is secret, silent,  
wasted. The victim, overwhelmed by the lies of her adversary—her perpetrator—suffers  
the soul-searing fires of shame and guilt and dies without protest. The forces of evil are  
left unimpeded to go on to find other innocents to destroy.

I know what it means to be a victim. I learned very early to suffer silently, to be  
terrified of drawing fire.

My parents drank “a lot.” And when they drank they fought, physically as well  
as verbally. Sometimes their fights would go on for hours. I would often hide in a closet  
and wait for their rage to decide my future—whether I could eventually come out of  
hiding and sneak back into my own bed to suck my thumb and clutch the pillow I  
couldn’t sleep without—or whether one of them would kill the other. Both of them  
continually threatened to do just that.

I was only five, but I’d seen dead things. Dead animals on the road. Dead  
chickens my father had butchered, dead dogs he had shot. What if? What if one of these  
nights while he’s fighting with my mother he gets as mad at her as he did at those dogs  
that afternoon last summer. I can still hear the shotgun blast. I can still see the blood.

The dogs were fighting when my dad drove up in his pickup that day. He was  
late coming home from work, probably from stopping off for a few beers. My mom was
screaming at the dogs, squirting them with a garden hose. Neither dog cared for anything except to kill the other. They were bitter enemies, far more than instinct called for.

“Highball” had been my parent’s pet since before I was born. I didn’t know life without Highball. He was big and black and had the nature of a saint. At least until Danny came. Danny was a pure bred English pointer that my father had purchased for only one reason—to breed to the purebred bitch we’d raised from a puppy. Whether it was the bitch or the family Highball was jealous of, he had a murderous hatred of Danny. Nothing would deter him from the chance that had come to him when he escaped his dogrun that afternoon and found Danny was also free.

Shouting and swearing at me and my mother as much as at the dogs, my father had come out of his truck, running. He had his shotgun in his hand. It was duck and pheasant season in California, and he was never unprepared to go hunting. My mother backed away from the dogs. Or maybe it was from the gun.

Just at that moment Danny broke Highball’s death grip and took off running across our half-acre back yard. My dad followed the dogs, still shouting. He screamed at me to shut the gate so they couldn’t get through into the side yard and the grape orchard beyond. I didn’t get to the gate before Danny. Highball was literally on his tail.

Shoving me aside my father went through the gate after them. Just past the fence made of chickenwire, Highball caught Danny and began to maul him again. I stood and watched as my dad lifted his gun and took aim. He hesitated, waiting for the dogs to separate. He was willing to kill Highball in an attempt to save Danny’s expensive bloodlines. Just then Danny bolted from under Highball’s jaws. The sound of the gun reverberated off the fence, the house, the trees, the garage and back again.
Everything seemed to go into slow motion for me. I saw Highball drop without a sound, but Danny only stumbled and then kept running—right for me. There was blood all along his side where the birdshot had peppered him.

In terror I turned and fled up the back steps of my house. My flinging the screen door wide open gave Danny time to come in behind me. In his death throes, running on instinct alone, he followed me as I ran through the kitchen, the diningroom, the livingroom and out the screen door in the front of the house. He left a trail of blood all the way. Finally, in the front flower bed, amidst my mother’s favorite pansies, he dropped dead. I collapsed behind a tree in our front yard and sobbed. Later I watched my mother scrub the blood out of the carpet and water it into the pansies’ roots.

What if during one of their fights I came out of the closet when the silence fell and found blood everywhere. My mother’s blood. Or my father’s.

That very next winter, I remember standing along side my mother by the kitchen stove; my mother dressed in only her underwear and a blanket. She had stripped her wet, muddy clothes off on the back porch. There was still mud dripping from her hair and from under the blanket. My eyes just cleared the top of the stove. I watched all the burners get red-hot for warmth. The oven was cracked open, also for the same reason. My mother was shivering. Though it seldom snows in the Sacramento valley, the winter rain can be near freezing. My dad had thrown her in a mud hole in the grape orchard next to our house. Then he had taken off in his truck.

I looked up into my mother’s face, swollen with tears and with drink. She had a butcher knife in her hand. “I’m going to kill that bastard,” she hissed, “the next time he steps through that door.” She opened another can of beer and sat down at the kitchen.

5
table to wait. I slipped away to the bathroom to wipe the muddy water off my feet. In bed I fell asleep, waiting for my father to come home, hoping he wouldn’t, wishing him dead—just not at my mother’s hand.

When I’m “writing down the bones” like this, as Natalie Goldberg puts it—facing the truth about my life, either past or present—it feels like I’m scraping bone and finding fire.

But his word was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing and I could not stay.

I can’t write the truth in my life without feeling the fire of it. And feeling the fire, I can hardly write. But I have to. I have to tell someone about this life I’ve lived and am still living. It’s important for me. Maybe for others. The imperative to do so burns in me with all the fire of God’s own truth—plainly I can not deny it. I can’t be silent any longer.

3

Like a novice behind convent walls, I spent most of my life cloistering my writing away within the pages of my journals, barely whispering lest I disturb anyone. As a child I made up poems and stories as I played with the written word, rejoicing in its inherent silence. As an adult, I filled my journal with the litany and rituals of a dedicated Mormon woman’s service to husband, children, home, church, and community—all in the name of serving God. I had no idea at the time that, as the “good son” in the story of the prodigal so poignantly demonstrates, serving someone is not always the equivalent of knowing them. You can serve someone for a lifetime and never come to know them.
Then came the day when I finally realized how little I knew God or those I had served. Suddenly, the god I had made of the successful family was ripped away from me by another’s agency. All my efforts to keep up a facade of “fineness” while silently absorbing and denying twenty-three years of continuous abuse were destroyed in the flaming light of truth.

First, I found out that my oldest daughter was using drugs. Then I learned that her father had sexually abused her. When I questioned her younger sisters I found that two of them had received similar attention from him. When my husband came home from work that afternoon I confronted him. He admitted to me their stories were true. I immediately made an appointment to counsel with our bishop. My husband would not come with me.

Later, saved by the girls’ refusal to tell anyone else what they had told me, my husband denied confessing to me and convinced our local priesthood leaders that I was the one with the problem. He told them I had been going to a lot of support group meetings for people who, like myself, struggled with compulsive eating disorders. The people I met there had filled my head with all kinds of screwed up ideas about childhood abuse being a cause for addictions. The priesthood leaders believed him.

“Now, . . . Sister Bernhard, after all you’ve told me about your husband’s behavior, I feel like I need to ask you a personal question. I hope you won’t mind.”

“No, bishop, of course not.” I spoke through my sore throat. I had cried all day. My tears began when my older daughter had come to me and sobbed out the description of her father’s recent sexual advance towards her. I had continued crying through the
afternoon as I questioned my younger girls and found two with similar stories. My tears had begun again when I confronted my husband, received his quick confession and his even quicker excuse. It was all because of me and my neglect of him, he said. It was because I went out of the home so often and left my “marital duty” to him unfulfilled. I had been able to stop crying long enough to fix dinner that evening, but the tears had began again as I shared what I had learned that day with my bishop.

“... and when I confronted him, he confessed that all three girls’ accounts were true.” Sharing the fact of my husband’s own confession brought my account to an end.

While I was talking I couldn’t bear to meet my bishop’s eyes. I had spent most of the time either staring at the wad of Kleenex™ in my hand or with my eyes closed. When I finally looked up I found the bishop’s eyes closed, too. His face was twisted into a sincerely pained expression. Finally he opened his eyes, leaned his elbows on his desk and spoke.

“Sister Bernhard, I just don’t know what to say. This is so hard to believe of your husband. He is such a good man, so faithful in his commitment to the Church. He’s the District Scouting Commissioner, a high priest, . . .” The bishop was shaking his head as his voice trailed off.

I waited silently for the question he was apparently hesitant to ask me. I didn’t blame him for his shock. After all, I had lived with this man he called good, faithful, committed. I too, had desired to believe all those things of him, despite the daily verbal and emotional battering he gave me and as many of our children as crossed his path between 5:00 p.m., when he got home from work, and bedtime. Everyone in our home sighed with relief when he left to conduct scout meetings or attend to other church duties.
The bishop began again, "Sister Bernhard . . ."

More hesitation.

It consoles me a little when I remember this interview to realize that this decent man, who I choose to believe would never lust after his own daughters even if his wife were unavailable, had such a hard time getting this question out. I like to think it meant that somewhere inside he wasn’t feeling sure of its validity.

"Let me see, Sister Bernhard, How can I put this? Do you think, . . . I mean to say, . . . have you thought that maybe you’re not giving your husband enough, . . . uh, . . . uh, . . . attention, . . . I mean enough sex? You know, some men have a very high need for that kind of uh, . . . uh, . . . reassurance. If you know what I mean? I mean maybe he needs you to be there for him more, . . . you know, . . . in that way."

I sat speechless. Here sat a person who represented the Lord according to everything I had been taught and had willingly chosen to believe. Could it be that the Lord would excuse a father for being sexually agressive towards his own daughters? Would the Lord attribute the failure in faithfulness and righteousness to the mother in such a situations? I felt like someone had hit me in the stomach, stabbed me through the heart. The flames of insanity rose up and and threatened to consume my mind as I silently sat and absorbed the incrimination.

Me? Me. I caused this? This is my failure? Oh yes, I had almost forgotten for a moment—I am the woman, the weaker vessel. I’m the daughter of Eve, the weak one, the faithless one, the slacker, the temptress. Because of my weakness the poor man was set up to fall.
I put my hands to my face and sobbed. I couldn’t speak. There were no words to defend me. And besides, there was no time to defend me. The bishop had his next appointment waiting in the hall. We had already run ten minutes over the fifteen allotted for each interview. When I had called Brother Johnson, the executive secretary, I had asked if I could have the bishop’s last appointment, hoping to have some extra time to counsel with him, maybe even pray with him—ask for a blessing. I was told that slot was already spoken for. I hadn’t insisted. And now, at this point there was no time left.

I guess the bishop took my silence as a confession to the truth of his train of thought. He stood up and offered me the box of tissue on his desk. “Well, Sister Bernhard, I’ll have Brother Johnson call Brother Bernhard and make an appointment to discuss this with him as soon as possible.” I stood, trembling, stifling my tears. I took some of the fresh tissue and began mopping my face. Obviously, or so it seemed to the bishop, I was calming down, getting over my emotional outburst. My attitude had been set on the right path, pointed in the right direction. I just needed to go home and read Fasinating Womanhood or The Art of Homemaking one more time. Actually, I just needed to stuff it all back inside long enough to get past the happy couple sitting outside the bishop’s office waiting to get their temple recommends renewed. Thank goodness, the bishop could end his evening on a positive note.

I never knew when my husband was called in and talked to. My girls would not consent to being interviewed. When asked to go in and talk to the bishop, their eyes got as big as proverbial saucers and went as blank as a TV screen after 2 a.m.—filled with shattered signals that have lost all coherency or sense. Neither would they talk to the case worker from the Division of Family Services. She took my story, looked around at
our relatively peaceful environment—it was ten in the morning and most of the kids were in school. There was a picture of the temple on the livingroom wall, a piano in the corner, lots of books on the shelves, the local LDS radio station was playing on the radio in the kitchen. Obviously, all was well here. She went back to her office to write up her report. One woman’s word, no other signs of abuse. Eventually the entire thing was counted as a false alarm, a figment of my foolish imagination. Once again I was alone with my experience—my daughers’ confessions, my husband’s private admittance of guilt to me. As alone as I had always been with the entire marriage of secret, intangible abuse.

My husband’s anger towards me and the children only intensified over the next few weeks. As far as he was concerned, it was no more than what we deserved for embarrassing him in front of his priesthood leaders.

"Dogs! You pigs! Animals! Get out of my life!” he would snarl at them if they drew any attention from him. In the bedroom, though, I was still expected to perform—nightly. As far as he was concerned, my little bid for attention had backfired in my face and set me in my rightful place. Everything could go back to normal, now. So come to bed, Colleen, and set the mood in the home. Refuse, and watch what happens—watch what you’ve caused by not being charitable enough, patient enough, longsuffering enough, self-sacrificing enough. By not being a faithful wife.

Eventually the word spread throughout the ward that Sister Bernhard was having some sort of problems—emotional or maybe even spiritual in nature.

The bishop and his wife made a special visit to talk to me. I told them the truth—that I felt like I was going under, like I was drowning in lies and misjudgment. Within a
week I was taken out of my position in Young Women’s and called to nothing else. It was the first time in thirty years in the Church I hadn’t held at least one calling.


What about my testimony? What about my word? Didn’t my life of faithfulness and service in the Church and community speak for my integrity and sanity? Since the day I joined the Church at the age of fourteen, I had given my life to it.

For over thirty years I had participated in full fellowship; I had been in continuous possession of a temple recommend since my temple sealing in 1968. I had quit college to have my twelve children and to support my husband in his career. I was a graduate of the Church’s seminary and Institute of Religion programs. Why would anyone think I would want to tell such a story to my bishop if it weren’t true?

Why was my husband’s public performance alone reason enough to believe his version of this story, wholesale? Why, in sharp contrast, was my public performance considered to not be a valid indication of my honesty? He had admitted his actions to me. It wasn’t just my girls’ stories I was going on.

As the reality of my suspect and devalued position as a woman in my adopted culture settled into my heart, it compounded the pain of realizing that my husband of twenty-three years was a consumer—a user and abuser—of human souls. The fire raged within the whitened sepulcher and the facade began to peel.
Back at home, that night after my appointment with the bishop, I sat and stared at my journal. I felt null, void. What would I fill my journal with, now? Pages of zeroes. Ciphers? I couldn’t find any voice—not even a writing voice. It had been demonstrated to me as plainly as could be that neither my thoughts nor my words meant anything. They were as so much drivel, trivia. Not to be taken seriously. I could no longer pretend that things were “fine,” sufficient, adequate, bearable—that I was a happy, cherished, honored member of my family or my culture. I felt as if my life were draining out of a heart pierced with deep wounds; great gaping holes from which nothing but questions, pain, sorrow, and confusion spilled out. Finally, I took up my pen and wrote out my pain and all my other truth, pouring it into the pages of my journal. It felt like I was writing in blood.

To tell the whole truth about my life—how I thought, felt, believed, and didn’t believe—felt like hell at first. It was so unfamiliar, so unpopular in my cultural context. Gradually, though, as I died to everything else but my own unveiled truth—the pretty and the ugly, too—I began to develop an affinity for truth, a hunger. As I began to recoil from the pretense and sham around me, in my home and in my culture, I instinctively turned to the words of the prophets, both ancient and modern. I somehow knew that if I were going to find truth in this world it would be through their guidance. I knew I could trust the scriptures—particularly the Book of Mormon. After all, it was a book written and preserved especially for these last days. That book became a font of living water as I used my journal and my pen to ponder my way through each verse in writing. Between the
revelations of Nephi and Benjamin, Alma and Moroni I began to record the personal revelation that came to me as I likened their words to my own life. I began to know the Lord as I had never known Him in all my years of dutiful service. I found myself looking unto Him in more and more of my thoughts, living for the day when I would be perfected in Him and have the humility to look unto Him in every thought. My soul was beginning to be filled with a new fire as He drew near to me in Spirit and to counsel me with His own words through the Gift and power of the Holy Ghost. I found that Christ—His living reality, His precious words—was the true “gift of the Holy Ghost.”

_For I, saith the LORD, will be unto her a wall of fire round about, and will be the glory in the midst of her._

I know when I am in the presence of significant truth because somewhere in “the midst” of me, a full, burning, swelling sensation begins. The hair on my body stands on end as if I’ve just changed temperatures. My breathing pattern changes, becoming shallower, quicker. My throat tightens up. My eyes have a sensation of pressure in them, a burning that proceeds and often becomes tears.

Sometimes, in especially powerful and prolonged spiritual situations this awareness of truth begins as a sensation of warmth at the crown of my head that moves down over my shoulders, rejoices in my burning heart, descends into my bowels, passes through my loins and weakens my legs. A trembling begins deep inside me, as if a quake is beginning at the hot, molten core of the earth instead of on its surface. If it continues to increase, it eventually reaches the surface of my soul, and my body begins to shake. When I am under this influence I feel something changing, breaking apart at my core. It is my heart. Within my heart I find a white-hot ember that is not being consumed by the fire, but actually
welcomes it. I feel a heaviness across my shoulders like invisible wings, like a weight of

glory. My entire body feels tense—energized—poised for flight. The question always
remains—will it be flight to God or away from Him? With my revealed heart filled with
the everlasting burning of my own “I AM,” will I come to Him or run from Him?

To Him! To Him! Lord, I will come to Thee. Follow Thee. Cleave unto Thee
above all others!

I feel like I am on a high mountain. All things that are expedient for me to see or
know are given me in the hour I need them. And with the eyes of my understanding I see
that God is over and above and around and through all things. I no longer know it just
from the prophet’s testimony.11 I have “seen” it. I have “heard” His own testimony of it.
I have experienced it. It is filed in my brain cells under “reality”—not fantasy or even
faith.

From this high place I see that I am, like Nephi, “highly favored of the Lord,” even
though I have “seen many afflictions in all my days.”12 He has given me His heart and His
mind in return for mine. I am aware that everything that happens in this world, happens
according to His allowance—even evil. I see that there is a purpose in all things—even
the challenge of evil, of victimization and martyrdom—to prove the hearts of everyone
involved—both the victims and the perpetrators. I see there are no coincidences; no
mistakes, nothing that His Mercy and Power can not, will not, and does not satisfy and
make right. I see that there is a love so encompassing, so penetrating, so all consuming
that it is the reason for our very existence. It is the source from which we came and it is
our destiny as soon as we choose it. No matter how long any of us resist—though that
might be forever—this love will wait. This is the love that suffereth long and is kind. It is
the pure love of Christ that fuels every good life—no matter what other religious
traditions have renamed Him. This is His love and it is mine and I am consumed in it.

Though this relationship is communicated to me as Joseph Smith once described,
through “the spirit of revelation” or “pure intelligence,” 13 I record it in the “weakness of
my own language” as conversations with the Lord. As miraculous as it may sound, I have
found God willing to converse with me, even as Joseph promised, “as one [person] with
another,” 14 and to counsel me, literally, in all my “doings”—even through the death of my
oldest daughter four months after her disclosure of her father’s incest; even through the
divorce I finally initiated.

5

“The Spirit of God, like a fire is burning . . .” I can hear the Tabernacle Choir tape
plainly from my car stereo, even though the car is parked several yards away. I left the
tape playing on purpose. It helps at times like this.

I sit in the early afternoon sun and watch ants scurry in and out of the shady
crevices of the carving on my daughter’s headstone. I’m beginning to sweat, but sitting by
Karen’s grave, I find some reason to enjoy the heat. Somehow it makes it less annoying
sitting with someone who will never feel it again.

February 3, 1971 – August 26, 1989. I stare at the dates on the headstone,
repeating the math over and over in my mind, wondering if it will ever make sense—if the
numbers will ever stop looking like an advanced calculus formula that means absolutely
nothing to my mortal mind. Eighteen years, six months and twenty-three days, no matter
how you look at it, it doesn’t add up to nearly enough birthdays.
I just celebrated my forty-eighth. I stopped that day, as I do every year, and smiled at the black mug on my bookshelf above my computer. Karen gave it to me at my fortieth birthday party. It reads, “I’d rather be forty than pregnant.” It’s still strange, especially with three grand-babies due in the next month, to think she’ll never get to be either forty or pregnant. Something reminds me I can trust God in all things—including this. It’s been seven years since her death. Five since my divorce.

Karen’s plot is at the top of Orem City’s Cemetery, near the chainlink fence that separates the green lawns from the now dry October hillside. The hills are criss-crossed with dirt-bike trails and hiking trails. She loved biking and hiking and skiing and softball and dancing and . . . Trust God in all things.

I brush some dry grass clippings off the flat stone at her head and study another grave only fifteen feet away, decorated for the impending “holiday”—Halloween. There’s a large tole-painted decoration in the shape of a red wagon filled with three figures of little children in costumes—a devil, a ghost, and a bat. There are several plastic jack-o-lanterns arranged near by, the kind children collect candy in. I sit and wonder if there might be candy in the ones I’m looking at. Parents do strange and tender things when their children precede them in death.

I get on my knees, crawl over to “her” side of the stone and lie out flat on the grass on my back, my face to the sky. It’s a “thing” I do occasionally—lying on her grave—sort of an exercise in going down into the depths of humility.

In the seven years since that hot August afternoon when she and some friends had filled “Big Gulp” cups with a little coke and a lot of rum and taken off for Lagoon to meet some guys and never made it; since that hour when she went through her friend’s
windshield head first and ended up on the other side of the sky in some other time and space—I haven’t come here as often as a dutiful mother should, but I’ve come as often as my heart could bear it. I’ve missed most of the anniversaries of her birthday and her death-day. I especially avoid public days of remembrance—Memorial Days, holidays. I hadn’t even come up on that first Christmas.

Throughout the traditional Christmas activities that first year after her death, we had all pretended to be so “okay” without her, mentioning her only now and then, joking about her sense of humor. She would have wanted it that way.

I have to admit, though, our reenactment of the birth of Christ—replete with improvised costumes for Herod and his soldiers as well as the wise men, shepherds, angels, donkey, and sheep—left me crying. Even though we had gone high-tech and rigged up a shop light on a pole so our angel could stand on the piano bench and hold it over the stable scene, I kept “seeing” another angel—a skinny little girl with wispy blond hair feathered out from her head—probably reacting to the static electricity in the tinsel halo she wore. Actually, I kept remembering the snapshot taken when Karen at ten years old had played the angel, standing on the piano bench draped in a white sheet, wearing tinsel garland around her head and holding a big aluminum foil covered cardboard star out over the “manger” (a cardboard box) where her own favorite doll lay. All the other children, dressed as the holy couple, the shepherds, wisemen, or sheep, knelt in adoration. Remembering her as that angel put the idea in my head: I knew I had to go out to the cemetery and lie down on her grave—as soon as we had our first heavy snowfall.

The snow finally came. For a night and two days it fell almost continuously. Late on the second evening it slowed and then stopped. I had waited until after dinner was
finished and cleaned up to leave the house. No one noticed me leave. I didn’t expect to be gone long. I wanted to go alone. I didn’t tell anyone. It was only a three-minute drive. I was pretty sure no one else would be there on such a night.

After negotiating the unplowed lanes of the cemetery, I parked my car under a street light near her grave. I sat in my car for a long time, contemplating the stretch of “virgin” snow between me and the little tree next to her grave. I didn’t want anyone to see what I was about to do and think I was crazy. I wasn’t trying to be crazy. I was just trying to be honest—honest about how much I missed her; how much I longed to be close to her physically—just one last time. After all, her physical self was the part I had been God’s instrument in giving her. I could not quit aching to hold her in my arms just once more.

Finally, mustering the courage to get out of the car and wade through the snow, I had lain in the snow that night, ignoring the cold creeping through my jacket. As I lay there I fantasized about how I wished the police and paramedics had called me that August afternoon. “Mrs. Bernhard, your daughter has made a terrible mess up here on I-15. We’re going to need you to come clean up after her and take her home.” I would have. I would have gone and gathered what was left of her in my arms and held her on that drive to Holy Cross Hospital. I would have been as blessed to be covered with her blood then as she had been to be covered with mine eighteen years before on the night of her birth.

I think lying in the snow in the cemetery that night, trying to grasp the fact that my child was dead before me—such an out of space, out of time, out of sync, out of whack, out-of-my-mind sort of thought—was the coldest I’ve ever been in my life.
Cold or not, I couldn’t stand up until I had fulfilled my original intention, a singularly irrational urge—to make the biggest snow angel I could right there on her grave. Spreading my arms over and over again, I tried to create wings worthy of her. I had never made a snow angel in my life, though it had been her favorite winter thing to do. Exhausted from pushing the snow back and forth, I stopped and watched the steam from my breath rise into the black night sky and smiled at the joy I suddenly felt. In my mind’s eye all I could see was her flashing smile. I wondered just how far God allowed proxy work to go.

“Mom! Mom! Watch me! Watch this!” She waved to me from the front lawn of our family home in north Orem. Her friends stood watching her from the street. Some of them had already piled into the Blazer. A couple were securing her skis to the ski rack on top of the car. The exhaust from the tailpipe and the breath from all their faces rose into the air. The sky was bright blue. Twenty-seven degrees under clear skies. Eight inches of new snow in the valleys. Twenty-four new at Snowbird on a base of eighty-four inches. Karen was a snow-bunny of the highest rank. She had been one ever since she saw her first snow storm—a freak event in Las Vegas back in ’73. She had been two.

Now, with only a week until her eighteenth birthday, and a day of skiing ahead of her, she glowed so bright I thought her entire form would melt into the flat, untouched expanse on our lawn as she prepared to fall straight backwards into the snow. Holding her arms out at right angles to her body, she smiled up at me to make sure I was still watching. I was the exact opposite of Karen in my absolute abhorrence of cold and
snow. I clutched the top of my house-robe around me and let the hot air from the vent at my feet balloon out the skirt of my nightgown. I raised one arm, waved, and smiled back. Our eyes met and a hint of the old energy sparkled, the love energy that passed so freely between us when she was younger.

Why was it that in these last few years the farther apart we were the more we could relax and connect? Just typical teenage withdrawal from parents was what I wanted to believe. But some part of me knew better. Somewhere in me I could sense a despair in her distant expressions, in her eyes. Sometimes, when our eyes would meet, I’d feel like a peasant woman in the middle ages watching my child be carried off over the shoulder of an enemy warrior as part of the plunder from our village. But having just been beaten into submission and raped myself, I could do nothing but sit by my burning house and watch her disappear.

I tried not to let tears well up as I waved to her from the window. She fell back into the snow almost in slow motion, yelling out a war-hoop as she fell. All her friends roared with laughter and called her name. Their voices rang through the otherwise pristine sabbath silence of our ninety-five percent Mormon neighborhood. I tried not to think of the fact that these kids were taking more than just skis to the slopes with them; that somewhere in all their preparations they had made sure to procure enough pot and booze to make the day really fly.

After opening and closing her legs and lifting and closing her arms several times to make the angel, Karen jumped to her feet, squealing with delight. She stood on the sidewalk triumphant while a couple of friends helped her brush the fresh powder off her snow suit, her jacket and her ski cap. Then one by one they squeezed into the car. I’m
sure there were not enough seatbelts for them all. Karen was the last one in. Just before pulling the door closed behind her she turned and gave me a thumb up. I waved feebly and dropped my arm to my side.

I thought of the snowy roads up Provo Canyon, the icy river that ran below the road, the sharp turns. I thought of the lack of adequate seatbelts. The kids who had them probably weren’t wearing them. These were young people who, though raised in families where law and order was preached, seemed to have no inclination to respect it.

After they were gone I stood for a few moments and looked at the snow angel on the front lawn. No reason to hold back the tears now.

Or now.

I see that I as a woman—the traditional victim figure, along with children—have only one power and that is to “cry out.” And I see by the scriptures that this crying out is actually, before God, very powerful.

And the sobbings of their hearts ascend up to God against you.15

While it is true that I have no truth and no voice that God doesn’t give me, it is not true that God gives me no voice or no truth.

He has given me this voice—this mind, these feelings, this life. Through the crucible of this life, I have come to know several truths that His testimony has confirmed to my heart with an undeniable burning:

Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures?16
Life has taught me a few truths that His voice to my heart and mind has confirmed. By His testimony, administered to me by the power and Gift of the Holy Ghost, I know these things are true:

The Church is true even when the people aren’t.

“The priesthood” is not the men in the Church. It is the Power of God that is in some men—all too few and all too seldom—to act in the Name of God.17

Power in the priesthood is not an exact synonym for offices, keys, or even for patriarchy. Power in the priesthood is synonymous with Christ; and His power is upon me and upon my children, no matter what their father says or does.

There is one family that is forever, and that family is the Family of God. I am a daughter of a Heavenly Father who loves me . . .” That is forever. My two little grandchildren, born out of wedlock and adopted and sealed to other parents and grandparents, are still in my family through the Father’s power in Christ.18

There is one success that compensates for failure in the home—in fact it compensates for every other failure. But it is not a worldly success. It is to come to know the pure love of Christ. It is to come to love the fire.

It is my prayer that the only Muse19 I trust in, even the Spirit of Truth20, will possess me in this work, be with me in the fire and transform the fires of martyrdom for both me and my children into the fires of exaltation.

For this purpose I cry from the fire.
Notes

1 Psalms 39:3.

2 Jeremiah 5:14.


4 Mosiah 17: 14.

5 Daniel 6:22.

6 Daniel 3:25.

7 Natalie Goldberg, *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within* (Boston: Shambhala, 1986.)

8 Jeremiah 20:9.

9 Mosiah 2:17.

10 Zechariah 2:5.


12 1 Nephi 1:1.


14 Ibid., 345.

15 Jacob 2:35.


17 D&C 121:39.

18 D&C 50:41-42.

20 D&C 88:66; D&C 93:8-9; D&C 103:20.
In the Light of My Closet:
the Confession of a Mormon Mystic

1

It’s 5:03 a.m. I’m sitting at my desk. I’d be in the dark if it weren’t for the light from my monitor screen and the light from my walk-in closet ten feet to my right. The steady whirring of my hard drive takes on a barely perceptible rhythmic sound when I hold my breath and listen to it, almost like a cat purring and breathing at the same time.

Suddenly, as if my metaphor for the computer has given off some sort of beckoning energy, I hear a scratch at my closed bedroom door. It’s my cat, Squat, asking me to let him out. Unlike the computer, he doesn’t wait for my commands, he gives them. Your typical cat.

As I obediently open my door to him, I notice that my kitchen light has been left on all night. I’m not surprised or alarmed. There’s always a light burning at our house. Kitchen or bathroom or hallway—or all three. As you can imagine, my electric bill is high. But then, what else would you expect when you’re running a lighthouse for children lost in the night? Bruised and beaten children I helped produce in those years when I knew not Christ—when I only belonged to His Church but not to Him. Children who have taken up their own abuse, who do everything they can to fill in the void I left when I stopped badgering and battering them and divorced their father who refused to stop.

I pass the brightly lit kitchen and descend the split-entry stairs in the dark. The burned out light in the entry hangs ten feet above the entry floor. I don’t have a ladder or
a man to climb one. I could probably get the job done myself without the man, though I
don't relish it. It's the ladder that's the most essential missing ingredient.

I open the unlocked front door and the early morning air swirls in for a moment.
It's refreshing. Even though it's the second week in September and we're trembling
between fall and summer, summer is hanging on. I stand in the doorway for a minute and
watch Squat scurry away into the bushes along the front of the house. I look to the east.
The approaching dawn is just barely beginning to outline the tops of the mountains.
One lone car passes on the cross street three houses away. I hear the footfalls of an early
morning jogger coming around the corner at the west end of our block. It's just a typical
morning in my Utah neighborhood. I live in one of the few places on earth where a person
can still leave their front door unlocked all night and have half a hope of being alive in the
morning. Though I have to admit newspaper reports tempt me to lock my children out
along with the rising tide of crime.

I close the door, turn and climb the stairs. I check all the couches and even some
of the corners of my front room. I never know which child I will find sleeping where.
Though there is a bed in the house sufficient for the needs of each of my last four children
under the age of eighteen, I can never count on them to be used by that particular child, or
by any child, for that matter. The cat usually has his pick. Before you shrink from me in
horror that I would allow four children under eighteen to roam the streets all night, let me
give you some background.

My youngest—an eleven-year-old daughter—usually sleeps on my bed. I say “on”
my bed because I have tried to encourage her to stay in her own bed by refusing to allow
her to get into bed with me, under the covers. Besides, sleeping with her is like sleeping
with a windmill. She sleeps as if she is trying to fend someone off, and judging from the vaginal scarring found by the examining nurse at the Children’s Justice Center last year, she has reason to. Still, I can’t refuse her when she comes during the night, dragging her own “Lion King” quilt and pillow, and crawls up on the empty side of my queen-size water bed. She’s there now.

My next two oldest children are both boys, and while they have a bedroom and beds here in this house, they choose to live with their father. I am the custodial parent, but that doesn’t make much difference when you’re a five-foot, six-inch woman and your sons are five-eight and six-two and want what they want. It seems that their father’s $100,000 annual income and total lack of willingness to discipline appeals to them at thirteen and fifteen more than my $14,000-a-year lifestyle that requires everyone to take some responsibility. I keep the lights burning for them, hoping someday they’ll want to come home.

The fourth bed belongs to my seventeen-year-old daughter. She hardly ever uses it because I won’t let her bring home the people she sleeps with. When she does come home she usually doesn’t make it further than a couch before she crashes into a drug-induced, coma-like sleep. If she’s here at all, I usually find her in the TV room, sprawled half-on, half-off the couch. When she wakes, our worlds are so far apart and her walls of anger, blame, and shame so thick, I can’t reach her. In fact, any attention from me sets her spinning off into space even further. I live in constant, aching fear that one of these nights she will fall through a black-hole and never return. That already happened to her older sister, my first daughter, who died in an alcohol-related traffic accident. All of this makes living with her like sitting a few feet away from someone poised on the edge of the
seventeenth floor of a high-rise building. The last thing I dare do is make any overt move toward her.

It's by His word of counsel directly to me that I leave my doors unlocked, that I don't fret the electric bill, that I allow my sons to have their choice, that I can endure my seventeen-year-old's life-style, that I can find the motivation to rise early and find Him. It is His living presence—not just a lot of second-hand rhetoric about it—that gives me the power to face my life-in-the-last-day challenges without Prozac or even Twinkies. It is by His words of comfort and forgiveness to me that I am able to face the truth about how I parented in the past. I awake every morning at four without an alarm clock, needing only that internal voice that Samuel first mistook as Eli's to bring me to my closet for an hour of "mighty" prayer—two-way communication between beloved friends.

In recent years more and more Mormons are coming out of their closet—out of hiding, in other words—and admitting their truth. Some admit they're agnostic; others admit they're gay; others disclose childhood sexual abuse and finally seek counseling for the devastating wounds they have been hiding. All of this honesty is pretty heady stuff. It makes me long to admit my secret: I've tried our religion, tested it under fire, and not found it wanting. Mormonism works. It delivers exactly what Joseph modeled: the most profound and yet practical degree of Christian mysticism ever known on earth.

2

Now it's 9:30 a.m. I feel like it's at least past noon. I've taken several phone calls, interacted with three children and haven't written another word about the life of a Christian mystic. I certainly have talked about it, though. "Colleen, the problem with you
is that you’re so spiritually minded you’re no earthly good,” a friend once chided me. Then she added, “And that’s also your greatest strength.” It seems like everyone who seeks me out as a friend does so because we have this quality in common—this heart-deep inclination towards the spiritual life; towards prayer, scripture study, journaling and “learning the Spirit of God and understanding it.” ¹ We are people who, like Ammon, do not think we can glory in the Lord too much or “say too much of his great power, and of his mercy, and of his long-suffering towards [us.]” ² Rather than talking of others and their circumstances (gossiping) or of the latest soap-opera or “ER” episode, we talk of our own real-life challenges and how turning to the Lord has worked to get us through—not by signs and wonders, but by the dispensations of wisdom, patience, counsel, comfort and peace ³ as “whispered” into our minds in the form of words, the words of Christ by the power of the Holy Ghost. ⁴ We believe in this true principle. We live it and we live by it.

Now I’m sitting here in tears, realizing that the word that strings all my days and years together and defines my soul is the word “mysticism,” a word that the Church I love equates with “false doctrine, sorcery, superstition and the traditions of men,” at least according to the official Topical Guide. Considering the synonyms listed in the “guide” on the topic of “mysticism,” is it any wonder that I cringed away from the word when I first knew it applied to me?

3

I was sitting in an undergraduate course in English literature. We were discussing the life of John Donne, his wild youth, his transformation in midlife, and his complete devotion to God in his later years. As a person who had only spent the last six of her
thirty years as a Mormon actually converted to Jesus Christ, rather than to just His church, I was deeply identifying with Donne’s midlife metamorphosis.

Then suddenly, I was pulled out of my reverie. The professor used the word “mystic” in reference to Donne. I cringed. Mystic? How could the professor use language like that in a BYU classroom?! Didn’t he realize that in our culture it was a profanity, a four-letter word in the same category with “grace”? I nursed my shock by reminding myself that this was the English Department. A person was apt to learn anything here. I mean, already, I had learned that I was not only a Mormon, but an idealist, a romantic, and a transcendentalist. These self-discoveries had taken me far enough afield from my previous life of cooking, canning, cleaning and crafts. It’d probably be best to leave this mystic stuff alone.

But the witness of the Truth wouldn’t let me be: this mystic word applied to me. I identified with Donne too much and with anyone else who, as President Ezra Taft Benson had once put it, “choose[s] to follow [Christ], be changed for Him, captained by Him, consumed in Him, and born again.” How could that be connected with the obviously (according to the Topical Guide) awful, very bad, wicked concept of “mysticism”?

I went to the Merriam Webster Collegiate Dictionary, 10th Edition, curious about its definition of mysticism.

1. The experience of mystical union or direct communion with ultimate reality.
2. The belief that direct knowledge of God, spiritual truth or ultimate reality can be attained through subjective experience.
**Wait a minute.** Wasn’t this very thing—the belief that direct knowledge of God, spiritual truth or ultimate reality can be attained through subjective experience—the very heart and core of Mormonism? Hadn’t the prophet Joseph Smith himself uttered these words?

So it was with me. I had actually seen a light, and in the midst of that light I saw two Personages, and they did in reality speak to me. . . For I had seen a vision; I knew it, and I knew that God knew it, and I could not deny it, neither dared I do it . . .

Wasn’t it Joseph who had also said,

. . . for God hath not revealed anything to Joseph, but what he will make known unto the Twelve, and even the least Saint may know all things as fast as he is able to bear them. For the day must come when no man need say to his neighbor know ye the Lord for all shall know him(who Remain) from the least to the greatest.

If a person claiming to have direct knowledge of God, spiritual truth, or ultimate reality”—by definition a *mystic*—was to be automatically lumped with “false doctrine, sorcery, and superstition”, where did that put Joseph Smith? Wasn’t he a mystic? And by believing in his words and putting them into practice, wasn’t that how I’d become a mystic too?

About a year later, in a graduate-level class on rhetoric, the concept of mysticism came up again. Someone read a selection from the writings of a woman, Teresa of Avila, identifying her as a sixteenth century mystic. As the rest of the rhetoric class went on to consider other quotes from other sources, I sat transfixed by Teresa’s words. They pierced me even more than Donne’s. The witness burned through me again: I’m one of these people. But who are they? What are they?
Sorcerers? I know I didn’t feel much like a sorcerer.

This time only a few weeks went by before my “wander” into the “General Religion” section of the BYU bookstore, where I had found Teresa’s Autobiography.

Or had it found me?

With the book in my hands, I rushed to the library to find an empty carrel in a deserted corner of the building where I could cloister myself and write in my journal. I recorded my soul-deep response to Teresa’s life and writings:

Now I have read a few more pages of Teresa’s and I am in tears. How can this be; how can she be quoting from my most private journals, hundreds of years before I was born? There is a oneness of heart and mind here I have never known with my sisters in Relief Society. Oh Lord! How I have longed to hear this kind of living witness of Thee from the lips of another woman. If this is mysticism, then burn me at the stake. I’m a mystic.

A few pages later in Teresa’s book I continued to write in mine:

You know, there was a time when I seriously thought mystical was the same as “mythical”—as in fairies and sprites. But fairies and sprites aren’t real and I am definitely real. Here I sit writing. I look around me, though, in the here and now of my life, and I see no one with whom to relate or identify—not this deeply, anyway. I know no one who will admit that God is to them a living presence, who shares conversation with Him at the veil just as the temple teaches we can. I find no one willing to admit that, like me, they walk in the spirit by nature and in the world as an always slightly lonely apparition. Once again, I have to cry out, Why? Why did he put me here in the midst of Mormonism? We have such a tradition of veiling and even outright hiding spiritual experiences. Yet we are supposed to be Saints. A whole church of Saints. A whole church of Teresas? NOT.

As I read on in Teresa’s life story, it became more and more obvious that in tone, essence, spirit, intensity, and in sincerity, her life and mine could be interchanged. And like Joseph, I knew that God knew that I knew it, and I could not deny it. A few nights later, I wrote in the same little notebook,
The energy that is released into my life by acknowledging this truth about myself is almost more than I can bear alone. I picture taking this book to someone, though, and laying it open and saying, “Read.” I struggle to fill in the details of that picture without fear.

Who? Who would I share this with? Who could I come out of my closet and tell? Who in Mormon-dom? No wonder I fantasize about returning to Catholicism. At least there I could be myself out loud. Here, so many are afraid. I have kept this light turned down in my life for as long as I can endure. In desperation I have taken to writing nearly every night from three to six a.m. I need no alarm clock. My heart and mind wake up to a call, to an eagerness that seems to pass both ways between God and me.

During these times of writing I feel like I have finally turned up the light. I feel like the eagle found and rescued from the chicken coop full of eagles who still think they’re chickens. God takes me to a mountain top and holds me up to the heavens and says, in spirit and in truth, “Thou art an eagle, now fly.” And I do, every night—or more accurately, every morning—between three and six. I spread my wings, ride the winds of God and soar overhead as Israel lies sleeping with dawn at our doors. Don’t we realize it will stay dark until we awaken to who and what we are? Sacred garments, sacred covenants, consecrated lives. Latter-day Saints. A nation of priests and priestesses, prophets and prophetesses.

Lord, there I go again, seeing too far. I’m too high. Too high. It is all true. Too true. I tuck in my wings. But its too late. I saw. I know the truth of who and what I am. Now, to reconcile that with where I am.

Since this first exposure to Teresa of Jesus, I was led, not knowing beforehand what to expect, into a class on Women’s Meditational Literature and discovered a body of writing by women who felt called directly by God and who, whether in the cloister or not, lived their lives “consumed in Christ.” Though none of their writings have ever made it into the canon of holy writ, it exists. I am not alone. There is a tradition, a tradition to which I belong.

Considering the uncanny similarity between my writing and that of such women as St. Perpetua, Hadewigch of Brabent, Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe and Amelia Lanyer, I feel a definite need to redefine and defend mysticism—at least Christian mysticism. With all due respect to the Topical Guide, I believe equating “mysticism” with
“sorcery, superstition and the traditions of men” is a mistake of the same caliber as catagorizing Mormonism with Satan worship, cultism, and the “creeds of the fathers, who have inherited lies.”

I believe my first sense of the mystical life—the mysterious reality of the spiritual, inside-out life perspective—came to me at about five years of age while lying on my back in fields of spring grass, surrounded and embraced by their wind-waved greenness, at home with the other little creatures hiding there—the grasshoppers, ants, spiders and the occasional lizard or snake. Of course, most of the time, all of these fellow inconsequential creatures stayed as clear of me as possible and I of them.

I didn’t go out into those private, sequestered, secret chambers of shoulder-high-to-a-five-year-old grass to commiserate with other life forms that no one gave more than minimal thought to. I sought that environment frequently because in its ignored abandonment I found a sense of something big and important. Something undeniable and all encompassing—something that included and esteemed everything, even me.

There, in those sacred, private places I imagined being loved, cherished. I played for hours at a family life that I had never experienced myself but only observed in my friends’ homes. Caring mother, loving father, cherished children.

At home, I witnessed and experienced the feminine—the female, my particular brand of “I-am-ness”—crushed into submission by every kind of abuse. Emotional, verbal, physical and sexual. In their drunken absorption, my parents thought no more of me being in the room than a night-stand or chest of drawers when they wanted to get naked and get
sexual. And if my mother was too drunk and my father wanted to get naked and sexual, I was recruited.

Sometimes I would bring my toy horses and cowboy figures into the fields, and my little private world would become even more micro. The grass would serve as tall forests or jungles where I would carve out corrals and homesteads for my little figures of heroism and truth. Being a child of the 50s, I was enthralled with Davy Crockett, Roy Rogers and the Masked Man. My heart resonated to this paradigm of male nobility and goodness. It felt like sweet balm to my otherwise male-battered female soul.

Some nights—especially in the summer—when there was no one home or sober enough to care if I was in bed, I would haul a blanket and a pillow out onto the lawn and lie on my back and let the infinite come down out of the stars and cover me, lie with me, enter into me so gently. No groping, no force. Soft, as if every pore of my body were access enough to my soul. I was loved and I knew it. I needed no mother, father, sister, or brother to tell me so.

Then, in my eighth year, as my father fought a brief battle with cancer, I found myself living with the family of one of his close work associates, first for weekends and then for weeks. Devoutly Catholic, they enrolled me in catechism classes. They assumed that my father, who had been raised as a strict Irish Catholic, wouldn’t mind. They were right. He didn’t mind, not so much for religious reasons, I would guess, but because he was very distracted in the five months it took him to go from a perfect, robust, bawdy health to imminent death.

The teachings I received in those catechism classes were my first exposure to Christ. Despite the Church’s emphasis on His terrible death, I knew He lived. I knew He
was the hero, the balm, the infinite that came down out of the stars and loved me. Sitting in class every Saturday morning, preparing for what the nuns insisted would be my “First Communion,” I knew better. I tried to tell them so. I asked questions and offered answers that weren’t in the printed catechism, that didn’t fit in the black and white world of my traditionally attired teachers. Consequently, I spent more and more time sitting out on the back steps, banished from the classroom for being “disruptive.”

Disruptive or not, I was a child obviously in need of religion and of salvation. Stretching the requirements as far as they could, the nuns and presiding priest finally approved me to participate in the Easter services. I was thrilled. I could think of nothing more wonderful than dressing up in an eight-year old’s version of bridal attire and approaching the altar of Christ to partake of the emblems of His flesh and blood and offer Him mine.

I did receive my first communion that Easter day, but not in the morning mass. In the morning service, kneeling on the padded bar attached to the pew ahead of me, surrounded by a couple dozen other little brides all in white dresses and veils, I swooned in a fashion that would have done Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe or Teresa of Jesus proud. Apparently, though, none of the nuns there at St. Francis’ little Catholic chapel knew much of their own heritage. Maybe it was the physicality of the resulting cut on the bridge of my nose that distracted them from any spiritual implications of my fainting spell. I was half-walked, half-carried out of the mass and did not approach the altar to receive the Eucharist until later that afternoon after my garments could be scrubbed clean of any sign of blood. It was sort of anticlimactic, actually. There was no early morning sunshine flowing through the humble-but-sincere stained glass windows along the east side of the
room; there was no smell of fresh little girls, beribboned and benetted and bowed and curled, perfumed and prepared. I don’t know. Maybe that is why I made it to the altar in the evening mass. Maybe it was the sunshine and the aura in the room that morning that had caused me to hold my breath too often, too long, and pass out. It would be many years before I would know the examples of King Lamoni’s father or Alma the Younger, who both were overwhelmed physically by the thought of coming to God.

After my father’s death, my mother and I moved from the socially acceptable neighborhoods to the part of North Sacramento that was relegated to migrant farm workers.

Here, the people either worked all day at hard day-labor or slept all day so they could drink all night. My mother did some of both. I went to school, between bouts with infectious hepatitis and my mother’s “boyfriends.” Even though I was only eleven and twelve, I knew one thing for sure: these were neither boys nor friends. I have memories of successfully fending off multiple advances. I have post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms to remind me of the times I wasn’t successful.

My best days were the days that followed the nights when my mother wouldn’t come home. I would spend hours on those nights praying. I only returned to church services in the Catholic church a handful of times after that fateful Easter day. I never made it to my Confirmation, which is traditionally held one year after the First Communion. That was all right, though. The prayers I offered during those years were confirmation enough that I was acceptable to Jesus Christ. I would start praying with memorized, rote prayers on the rosary—ten “Hail Mary’s,” one “Our Father,” then ten “Hail Mary’s” again. Always, always, somewhere into the process I would cease to pray
someone else’s words and begin to use my own. My prayers would dissolve into gut wrenching, heart-breaking, soul-cleansing exchanges between my Lord and me. Some nights I would fall into my bed, exhausted from my pleading with Him to restore my life to some degree of sanity, security, stability—all the time picturing real homes, adequate food, clean drinking water, new clothes, a mother and a father living together peacefully under the same roof. Instead of any of this, however, He gave me Himself in the form of an undeniable witness of His reality and loving availability to me. I knew I was in the presence of a living entity, kneeling by me, sitting by me, lying by me, holding me in invisible arms of tangible, rational love. Day after day, night after night, I survived, walking and talking with my God who had now become my dearest counselor and friend. Through Him I found sanity in insanity and sanctification in hell.

Somewhere in my thirteenth year, though, two monumental influences converged in my life that eclipsed my spiritual experiences and left me groping in the dark.

After creeping up gradually in the previous two years, puberty finally hit me full force. Since the age of twelve, I had been developing breasts, establishing my monthly cycle, hating and dreading every moment of it. I had watched how men leered at developed breasts. A woman ceased to have any hope of having a face as soon as she grew a bosom. She ceased to have a voice as soon as she could moan unintelligibly in the midst of intercourse. At least that’s what I had observed from watching my mother interact with men. Suddenly, in my thirteenth year I found myself with interests and longings that perplexed and confused me all at the same time. Despite my fears of the opposite sex, I found myself being drawn toward them, enjoying them, wanting their
attention and company. Desperately, I sought some moorings on this slippery slope. What could I grasp onto to save me from the heart-sickening life my mother lived?

Meanwhile, my prayers were changing. Not only was I feeling less childlike towards males in general, but even toward God who had always been male to me (though His comfort had always resonated with the definite echoes of a mother’s tenderness). How could I talk to Him without reservation about these kind of feelings I was having toward the masculine—these kind of longings? I couldn’t. The conversational, best-friend intimacy of my innocent childhood became eclipsed by my need for a lover. I couldn’t begin to conceptualize my dilemma, much less unravel it and lay it straight. All I knew for certain was that I fell into these confusions and fears and began to pull more and more of my truth out of my prayers. My relationship with my sweet God was no longer whole. It was compartmentalized, fragmented. I began to pray selectively, half-heartedly. Previously tender impressions and feelings from Him seemed to come less and less frequently. In truth, though, it was I who was backing away from our previous level of trust and communion. Prayer became a reluctant, uncomfortable chore.

It was in this state of half-hearted, only half-attentive relationship with the Highest, the Divine, the Truth; that His companionship became garbled and overshadowed by what I found in “romance” magazines and a handful of sexually explicit novels. The more I read, the more I wanted what I read. Still I was terrified of reliving my mother’s life. At least in this terror I found an undeniable need to pray about something, though my prayers were not as before . . . It wasn’t Him and me anymore—not in fields, not in star-filled skies, not in solitary bedrooms either kneeling or lying upon my bed. I wouldn’t let Him that close. I had fallen into a desperate need, or so I thought, to be loved by someone else
besides Him. But what could I do about it? I knew that if I didn’t allow Him in my life, I would be without sanity in the insane world I had grown up in, I would be sucked into my mother’s “tradition.” I would have multiple partners—one-night stands, even two-stand nights. I would become a whore, a misogynist the equal of any and all of my partners put together.

In the midst of this paradoxical combination of need and fear, my prayers were reduced to rote actions once more. I repeated the same prayer over and over again, driven not by faith in Him but by fear of me and of men. “God, what can I do? Please save me. Please show me what to do.”

Then one day in my thirteenth year, on an ever-so-lonely fall afternoon, I flipped the old black and white television from channel to channel—all three of them—looking for something to do besides my homework. I had come home from school to an empty house. I had no idea where my mother and her current live-in “boyfriend” were. He had gotten paid last Friday—it was now Monday—and they had gone out for some “groceries” and hadn’t come back since. Usually, they’d come home by sometime Sunday to sleep off enough of their drunk to go to work the next morning. But not this weekend. I had no idea why. I didn’t dare call the police for fear they would come and take me away from my mother. So I cleaned house, ate what “groceries” there were and waited.

As I flipped through the channels at every half-hour, I watched cartoons, *Gilligan’s Island*, the evening news, *Rawhide*, and finally the *Monday Night Movies*. The featured movie was *The Nun’s Story* with Audrey Hepburn. That caught my attention. I had never been able to forget the fascination I felt for the Sisters who had taught me in catechism. There was something about them—despite their reaction to my spontaneous
questions—or maybe because of their response that struck me as so absolute and secure. They seemed absolutely committed, absolutely safe in their black and white world. Maybe this movie would give me some insight into why these flesh and blood women seemed so aloft from the cares and ills of this world.

As I watched the movie I was instantly caught up in the main character’s reasons for seeking the life of a nun: her intense love of God, her longing to be free of the heartbreak of this world. I sat transfixed, weeping the first heart-deep tears I had shed in months as she took her vows of celibacy and poverty. That. That was how much I wanted to give to God. That was how much I wanted to love Him. As they placed a ring on her finger and declared her His bride, I lay down on the floor myself and wept uncontrollably, inconsolably. Suddenly I knew He was willing to be even loving husband to me. I knew then I had to take sacred vows, wear sacred, symbolic clothing and wear a ring that symbolized my covenant of consecration to Him. I knew that my body and mind were sacred gifts from Him to be offered back to Him. Once again, by a mystical experience—deeply spiritual, deeply personal—I was saved from being drowned in the toxic waste of my surroundings; saved by God and for God to live a life consecrated to Him and His work and glory. Having known, at that moment in my life, no other example of such a complete giving up of one’s life to God, I was sure I was being called to “take orders” and become a Catholic nun.

The only problem with becoming a Catholic nun or a Catholic anything for that matter, was that it had been five years and ten neighborhoods since my Catechism and First Communion experience. I hadn’t attended a religious service of any kind in all those years. I had no idea where to go, no way or means to go there. Besides, I had found a
more convenient way of cloistering myself and coming to God—I had discovered I could write, that I could put down on paper the “music” in my head, the response in my heart to the life I was living.

I had been an insatiable reader since about age seven. I remember reading Alice in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass before my eighth birthday, before my father died. And though I didn’t understand Lewis Carroll’s political intentions, I did sense the allegory to life and to life’s real characters. I read fantasies and fairy tales; I read dog and horse stories, mysteries and romances, historic fiction like The Agony and the Ecstasy, The Big Fisherman. I read biographies of Rodin and Tolstoy. These and myriad other books had been one of my favorite escapes from the otherwise pointless, irrational, mindless world of being my mother’s child. They had been my retreat. But my own writing became my holy place, my place of prayer and of communion, of sanity and of hope, of imagination, both fantastic and Divine. By the time I had finished eighth grade I had written a dozen personal essays, a handful of short stories, several dozen poems and at least one novella of about 115 pages. Unfortunately, most of these papers were lost in one of our quick moves to avoid yet another irate landlord wanting the last two months’ rent. A cardboard box was left behind and no one dared or cared enough to go back to get it. I always wondered if anyone looked in it before they tossed it in the trash. “Just a bunch of papers,” they might have said.
“Why don’t you just live life like everyone else?” My husband’s voice had dripped with scorn. “Why do you have to read some meaning into everything?” He turned and left me sitting in the front room of our two-room student apartment. Front room, back room, and bath—$60.00/month. Living room/kitchenette, bedroom and bathroom. That was it. I had a choice. I could either sit there in the front room or go into the bedroom where I knew he would be waiting in bed, never suspecting and never caring that his comment had stabbed me to the core of my soul.

I sat in the living room for a very long time and wrote in my journal. I didn’t write about my pain, though. That would have been disloyal to the priesthood (my husband) and to my eternal marriage. Instead I wrote about my unborn baby struggling against my already bruised ribs, my impending due date and my longing to contribute something as beautiful to the world as the Ice Capades performance we had attended that evening. The skaters’ skills, a result of a lifetime of dedication, had moved me to tears. I had tried to explain to my husband my enchantment with their talent, of how it thrilled me to be in the presence of such perseverance and excellence. That’s when he had started being derisive and sarcastic to me that evening, accusing me of making a big deal out of everything. How did I tell him that I didn’t make everything so significant to me; that it just was? Silently I cried and felt the baby grow still in my womb. I pictured him pausing to honor my sorrow, aware of it, wishing to comfort me. I felt, for a moment, encircled about in my baby’s love even as he was encircled about in mine. My tears turned to tears of gratitude and joy at being a mother and how it was already proving to deepen my consciousness of God’s love.
Obviously, in the eight years that had passed since that day I had longed to give myself to the Lord, I had not found my way to a convent. Instead, using a boy my own age—the hormones just couldn’t be denied—the Lord had found me.

7

“So when do you plan to get married?” It seemed like a legitimate question to ask a friend I’d known for nearly a year, especially one who carried my books home from school every day. After all, we shared the same “home room” table, lunch hour, second period algebra class, and last period mechanical drawing class. I think it was the mechanical drawing class that did it, that made it safe for a girl to ask a boy such a question. He continued walking along beside me, carrying all our books together and limping along, one foot in the gutter and one on the sidewalk—a strange combination of chivalry and klutziness.

“When I get back from my mission,” he answered without looking up.

“Mission? What’s a mission?” I had hardly heard the word used before in my life.

I listened as he told me about his church and how all young men go on missions when they’re nineteen and teach investigators for two years. “And then, when I get home, I’ll be able to get married in the temple for eternity.”

“In the temple? What’s a temple? You get married for eternity?”

Those were only the beginning of the questions I began to ply him with. Every day I asked him more. He told me about temple marriage, about being sealed to your partner for time and eternity. Somewhere in one of our conversations he even told me about the sacred temple clothing—the robes you wore while there, the garment you never took off.
I tried to picture how someone would deal with wearing a garment they never took off, but even that effort didn’t deter me. I was desperate to hear more. Could I learn more about his church? Who did I need to talk to? He said he’d ask his mom.

Several days later I got a phone call from a “Sister Perry.” She explained to me that she was a “stake missionary” and that she was calling to see if I would like to set up an appointment to meet the full-time missionaries at her home next Monday night. (This was in the pre-Family Home Evening era.) I was a little shaken by the use of the word “sister,” having only one previous exposure to the use of the term in a religious setting. I wondered if she wore a habit. She offered to come to my house and pick me up on the scheduled evening. Reluctantly, I agreed. I was deeply ashamed of the “poor white trash” appearance of the neighborhood we lived in. But nothing could compete with the need I felt from deep inside of me to learn more about this church that taught that all men and women—not just priests and nuns—could dress in sacred robes and be married for all eternity—and to each other, besides! That was exactly the degree of honor I longed to see in the male/female relationship. I gave her my address.

On that first night with the “elders” I fell madly in love, both with what they were teaching me and with them. If this is what going on a mission turned boys into—these fresh, clean-cut, dashing, sparkling, gorgeous creatures—I already had my friend’s farewell and homecoming and wedding planned.

The evening went like a dream for me and for the elders. I was a “golden contact.” I ate up every word they said and wept when they pulled the foundation of Christ out from under the church structure on the flannel board, making the whole thing fall to the floor. Now I realized how it was that the only church I had ever known had a
semblance of the truth, but not the fullness thereof. God didn’t want just select individuals to dedicate their lives to Him. He wanted the entire membership to be that devoted. This entire Church was His, preparing to be His Bride.

Now, I’m not sure how or where I got that message. I seriously don’t think it was something one of those cute boys—sorry, it’s the hormones—said that night, even though they did give me two lessons in one sitting and sent me home with a Book of Mormon and a copy of *A Marvelous Work and a Wonder*. I devoured *A Marvelous Work*, got thirty pages into the Book of Mormon and asked for baptism at our next lesson, two nights later. They inquired about my mother. Would she be willing to sign a permission slip for my baptism? I didn’t know how to tell them that the problem with getting my mother to sign something was not whether she would, but whether she could and how long it might be before I could catch her in that brief interval between shaking with withdrawals and being too drunk to write legibly.

I prayed to God for a miracle, and it happened. I had found her sober enough to sign if not to care. I had been baptized the next Saturday night, five days after hearing the first discussion. There were five people there—the two full-time elders whose names I have forgotten, Sister Perry (I found out she didn’t wear a habit); Brother Larsen; another stake missionary; and the custodian who opened the building, filled the font, emptied it when we were through, and locked up. Mine was the only baptism that night. I don’t remember music or talks, though I can’t imagine there weren’t some. I do remember, though, coming out of the water knowing that I was clean, searingly aware of my innocence before God. I do remember the hands on my wet head, the words “I confirm you a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints” and “receive the gift of
the Holy Ghost.” I had no clue then that those two phrases were not synonymous. I had no idea that I would spend nearly twenty-five years as a member of the true Church before I would open the Gift of the Holy Ghost—to know the truth of all things⁹ as it was expedient for me and to have the very words of my Savior teach me “all things what [I] should do.”¹⁰

First thing the next morning, I availed myself of my new church membership by showing up at early morning seminary to begin a lifetime of gospel study under the tutelage of many fine teachers. I eventually achieved 100% attendance at seminary, four-year graduation from the Institute of Religion, twenty-years of pilgrimages to BYU for Education Week, home study classes—all on top of the weekly routine of Gospel Doctrine and Relief Society lessons. Still, it would take me twenty-five years and the lessons of Job before I would appreciate the fullness of the gift of the Holy Ghost, of the First Comforter—to know the living reality of the Second Comforter.

8

That night of the Ice Capades, I lay down on the couch, curved my spine around my still and sleeping tummy, held my journal against my breast, and with my pen in my hand, fell asleep. At the time, it was gift enough.

The next morning my husband was furious with me for not coming to bed. He reminded me so much of my father—drunken—but in this case not with wine. I wondered what he was so “hung over” about. It would be many tragic years before I realized that he was addicted to sexual stimulation and, as with any addict, there was never enough; that when I wasn’t able or available he would secretly seek stimulation wherever he could find
it. Neither did I have the courage or a sense of self-sufficiency to recognize how much like my mother I was, sneaking comfort from hidden caches, not of booze in my case, but of candy, cookies, and such. Starving for the sweet feeling of love, ignoring the potential of the Holy Ghost to administer the greatest love the human mind or heart could comprehend or contain, I consumed sweet things continually. I also stayed pregnant or nursing continually. I cooked, canned and cleaned compulsively. I held multiple church callings. I read self-improvement books back-to-back and hung on every one’s counsel but God’s and made sure that I had no time for any prayers or journaling. After all, if I stopped to consult with the Spirit of Truth I might have to realize that I had recreated my mother’s spiritual destitution behind a thick white-wash of furious “religious” activity.

Just one more bushel of peaches, bottled and gleaming; just one more pulseless sexual exchange; just one more baby—surely, when I came to the end of all I could do, God would kick in. The only problem was that if I just ate one more batch of chocolate chip cookie dough I could probably do more. Even a Twinkie could hold me over, help me avoid bothering God for just a little longer. After all, He was busy with wars and rumors of wars and pestilence and getting ready for the Second Coming—all according to the standard rhetoric of my chosen religion. Long gone were the days when I knew for a fact He had time to hang out in green fields or lie out under the stars or cradle a forgotten, unloved little girl through abandoned nights so tangibly that she could remember feeling His heartbeat through His robes when she woke up in the morning. I could only guess that He had become a lot busier since I had become a Mormon.

Then came the day when all the busy-ness in the world—His or mine—could not stop me from admitting that I had done all that I could do. I needed Him and I needed
Him now—just as I had as a child. No games, no bargains, no bartering of obedience for blessings. With all faith in self-sufficiency and life-management 11 finally crushed out of me by the circumstances of my life—my husband’s sexual needs had taken on adulterous proportions, my weight was so high that no standard scale would weigh me (I was, after all, expecting my tenth baby in just over twelve years)—I gave up absolutely. I surrendered to the truth that I could never do enough, buy enough, eat enough, or sacrifice enough to make things okay in my life—to make my husband and children happy and peaceful. Shoot, I couldn’t even do that for myself.

Compelled to be humble, I was finally ready to become again as a little child, totally powerless, clueless. And when I did, He came. I began to feel His presence again as a tangible nearness. A long forgotten witness of His living reality began to flood my heart and mind with memories—more than this lifetime’s worth. I knew I had seen His face before. I did not have to seek open visions to do so; I just had to believe and receive the testimonies of the prophets and the veil hiding and eternal past with Him thinned. More and more often, I did not feel as if I was seeing through a glass darkly as Paul had described, but through a veil dimly. Years of temple experience and imagery began to make sense to me. I realized that my sacred garment that I wore both day and night truly did represent my relationship to my God; that it literally was a veil in His holy temple, which temple I am. I realized that it is here, inside of this temple of my heart, might, mind and strength that I can receive Him and have a living relationship with Him. I could talk with Him. He would counsel me. I could come to Him for comfort and solace. He would never fail me. I believed the prophets, I received their reward. Joseph’s promise that even the least of the Saints could know Him was being answered upon my head.
In my renewed relationship with Him, childlike and yet so enhanced and matured by the teachings of the restored gospel, I found all the sweetness I would ever need, all the strength, all the hope, all the glory, all the success a mortal could hope for—success that compensated, thank God, even for the failure in my home.

9

Within a year of this reestablishment of the true God of Israel in my center, the man who had been my center for so long became more and more enraged. My weight loss and increase in self-respect seemed to infuriate him, rather than please him. My reawakened desire for education—to return to my B.A. in the English program that I had scrapped when I had married at eighteen—made him bitter and hateful. Even though I waited for my youngest to get into kindergarten and only took classes that fit during that three-hour block—always at home when she and the other kids left and returned—he began to blame me and shame me for abandoning him and the family. I knew by two witnesses that his accusations were not true—my witness and God’s. I followed the prophet’s counsel to search and ponder the scriptures, to liken them unto myself, to write in my journal. I knew the literal meaning of the metaphor of the iron rod. The word of God through the living prophets, the scriptures, and as it was being “whispered” into my own heart and mind and recorded in my journals led me through an ever-darkening last-days scenario that began to reveal itself with my oldest daughter’s sobbing account of her father’s sexual attention toward her. Immediately after that came her plunge into drugs and alcohol and her death in an auto accident. Within weeks of that event, my second-oldest daughter, who also had memories of her father’s sexual advances, dropped out of
high school, became compulsively promiscuous, conceived and delivered a precious baby
girl of her own and gave the baby up for adoption. Over the next few years my three
“middle” daughters each took textbook paths of self-destruction, complete with alcohol,
drugs, sex, drunk driving, shoplifting. None of them would ever confess to being sexually
abused—at least not in words. When questioned, they would just shake their heads “no”
while their eyes would get scared, then vacant, as if they had gone away some place deep
inside to hide. I knew that look well. Their misogyny was plain to read. I wept bitterly
that I had modeled it for them in all those lost years.

My repentance eventually included a divorce, as bizarre and heretical as that may
sound to letter-of-the-law church members such as I was for twenty-three years. In those
days “thou shalt not divorce” was the second commandment, subpart B. The Lord had to
just about remove my hand to get me to release my death grip on the idol I had made of
the perfect marriage and family. I’m still suffering withdrawals. I still start shaking when
I see another woman sitting dutifully beside a man who has no time for her except in bed,
whose hands never touch her except in private places.

In the five years since the divorce I have prayerfully practiced my newly restored
relationship with God as I’ve camped on the edge of the beleaguered battleground of the
BYU English department. In succession, I have found myself at home around the
campfires of idealism, romanticism, and transcendentalism—but each only temporarily.
Sooner or later, I would perceive Truth’s call from somewhere even deeper in my soul,
and I would know there was an even brighter fire to be sought, something more to be
discovered, something more to be reclaimed.
This prayerful search for my truth, for my self, has been my default mode most of my life, and especially in the last decade. When I have even the smallest increment of time unclaimed by others, I immediately revert to conversing with the Spirit of Truth as embodied and personified in Jesus Christ. I am continually asking Him to teach me the truth of all things for me, and I trust the response in my heart (my feelings) and my mind (my thoughts) to be His words to me. My journals are filled with transcriptions of this dialogue.

10

It was just such an increment of time between obligations that led me, as I mentioned earlier, to the BYU Bookstore and Teresa of Avila's writings. I had come there on a "whim," for no planned or consciously purposeful reason. Within a half-hour I had been led to purchase two books. One was to read from and the other was to write in. I opened the first, The Life of Teresa of Jesus, standing in the aisle and began to read. Just a quick glance at the introduction affected my pulse, my rate of breathing and my sense of time. I felt, as Madeline L'Engle would put it, that I was experiencing a "wrinkle in time."12 This book wasn't just for me, it was about me.

I was... ashamed to go to my confessor... for fear he might laugh at me and say: "What a Saint Paul she is, with her heavenly visions. 13

... for it is love that speaks, and my soul is so far transported that I take no notice of the distance that separates it from God. 14

And she scribbles at breakneck speed and with tremendous intensity, never revising her work or even rereading it to see what she has said last. 15

Her mind was so completely immersed in Biblical
I could tell I was in for a feast.

I was more than a little puzzled, though, at the Lord’s instruction to purchase the second book I had felt attracted to—a small, lined journal with a antique quilt pattern on its cover. What could He be thinking or wanting of me? After all, He knows better than anyone how many pages of journal I produce a month in addition to the “field notes” that I collect in spiral notebooks as I go about my life’s walk. I’ve learned not to doubt Him, though, but to trust Him in all things, including my prayerful yet illogical impulses. I bought both books.

Today, I see the significance of the little journal I was attracted to. It has become more than cloistered. It has become the most “holy” of my journals—telling the whole truth about my mystical (spiritual) journey. Its cover is decorated with the photographic reproduction of an early American quilt constructed of thousands of scraps of fabric arranged in a “fan design.” In each block of the quilt the maker has not only placed the appliquéd fan but has also embroidered pictures and words—a text. This design perfectly symbolizes the cooperative felicity the book’s contents weave between myself and other women who write meditational and devotional texts. Inside this little journal, I have filled its lined, acid-free pages with permanent black ink, page after page written by my own hand and according to my perceptions in the same manner that Perpetua kept her “prison diary,” and Nephi kept his life’s text. I want it to be, like theirs and like Teresa’s, a witness of that source to which my children may look for a remission of their sins as well as the sins committed against them.
Thanks to yet another prayerful impulse to attempt what I was told would be a crucible of a class—English 655, "Women's Meditative Literature"—I know exactly why I purchased both books. Put in context by this crucible—I mean class—both have become witnesses to me of my own context. Filled, as they are now, with notes from me to God and from God to me, they are undeniable proof of what this class has confirmed: I am not only a Mormon (I was sure of that before I came to BYU, thank goodness), I am a mystic. A romantic, transcendental, idealistic Mormon mystic. And besides that, I write. I keep records of as much of God's dealings with me as I can. I must admit, though, that what I record is only a tithe of what He shares with me. And from that tithe I have only tithed again to produce the fraction I have shared with others. In this sharing with others, though, my joy in Christ is magnified a thousand-fold. I have joy and rejoicing in serving as a labor assistant to those who are giving birth to Him in their lives; who are becoming thus born again, His sons and His daughters. And that rejoicing tells me I have found my way to the fulfillment of the measure of my creation. It tells me I have found my way to what I am, which is exactly what God would have me be. In fact, it is what He called and sent me into the world to be; I see now that I will never need nor can I ever obtain more authority than this.

Jan. 10, 1994 – I've only read a few pages of Teresa's
writing but I am already suffering from a terrible case of literary deja vu. Everywhere in her writing I hear my voice; or are my writings an echo of her voice? Or are we both the echo of God's voice? God speaking to women? Through women? Women speaking for God? How can this be?

One way or the other I am beginning to realize that whoever or whatever we are, Teresa and I are cut from the same cloth. We are mystics. How can that be? It's easy for her, being a Catholic nun and dead besides. But what does that mean for me? What did God have in mind when he placed a mystic of the highest Persuasion in the midst of modern Mormonism?
Notes


2 Alma 26:16.


4 2 Nephi 32:4.


6 *Pearl of Great Price*, Joseph Smith History 1:25.


8 D&C 123:7.

9 Moroni 10:5.

10 2 Nephi 32:3.

11 Alma 30:17.


14 Ibid., 20.

15 Ibid., 18.

16 Ibid., 24.

Flight From Fear
(Isaiah 40:31)

I’m in seat 16-A. I was supposed to be in seat 16-F, but a lady wanted to sit on that side of the plane—the side with three seats—so she could sit with her two small children. I had a friend, once, who changed seats with her sister on an auto-journey from Provo to Las Vegas and lived to tell about the accident that took out her sister’s side of the car. My friend’s spent a life time in agony, unable to forgive herself for not being the one who died. I know I’d have a hard time forgiving myself if the mother and her two children died instead of me. Then again, I’d probably have an equally hard time forgiving myself if I died. Besides, this train of thought’s a little superfluous, since I’m on a plane. If there were an accident under these circumstances, we’d most likely all die. Comforting.

I can’t believe I didn’t bring a single thing to read. I did bring a half-empty notepad, though, and a pen or two. That should stand me in good stead. Two and a half hours to do nothing but write. Two and a half hours from Salt Lake City to Minneapolis, Minnesota. And then a short hour and a half hop to Detroit, Michigan. If I were back home at my desk in Orem with three and a half hours of uninterrupted time to write I would think I’d already died and gone to heaven. Hmmm, there I go again. “Flying doesn’t have to mean dying.” Maybe if I write that three hundred times.

The plane’s moving away from the terminal. It’s turning and taxiing into position for takeoff. It jolts and creaks as it hits bumps in the concrete. I notice that the molding that covers the seam in the cabin interior just inches from my face is missing some screws and flopping up and down with each jolt. No, let’s not exaggerate. It’s just wiggling, not flopping. I look out at the wing, at the different panels of metal, held together by rows of
rivets. I wonder if the rivets can come loose. Then I notice that the panels are different “colors.” Not colors, really. Actually, different degrees of shininess in the sun. Did that mean they’ve been defective at some point and had to be replaced? My heck, the plane’s a quilt!

The plane makes a full 180 degree turn and sits “still.” There is a sense of pent-up power that I can hear, but not with my auditory nerves. It is a “sound” that I feel in my bones that drowns out the roar of the huge engines only feet from where I sit. It isn’t something I perceive with my conscious mind. The truth is, my conscious mind is on the verge of overload trying to fend off memories of all the airplane tragedies I’ve read about. I “hear” this “hum” in my unconscious mind. It’s the sound of molecules colliding with each other. It’s the sound of a terrifying amount of energy, trembling to be released. I picture the plane crouching at the head of the runway, staring straight ahead, like my cat, Squat, when he’s gathering his every muscle for the pounce and the kill. He was always bringing home dead birds. I certainly hope there’ll be no kill today. No earth-bound pounce. Only free, faultless flight. But what if?

Come on, I tell myself. What if what? After all, thousands upon thousands of people fly everyday. Yeah, but I bet they’re not as terrified as I am. What if my terror gives off enough energy to interfere with the plane’s electronic guidance system. I picture the explosion upon impact and the pages of this notepad miraculously unharmed, found among the debris scattered across the crash site. Really. Do other people think like this on an airplane?

Suddenly the sound of the engines begins to increase. The plane begins to move forward. With ever-increasing speed. Forward. Forward. Still. Still. Forward.
Rumbling. Terrific sound. We’re still earthbound. We’re racing towards a twelve foot chain-link fence and the westbound lanes of I-215 at nearly 200 miles per hour.

And then up! The plane leaps into the sky at a forty-five degree angle. Instantly I feel like I’ve lost the fifty pounds I gained during the acceleration plus fifty more. My insides feel suspended. The chain-link fence is twenty stories below the belly of the jet by the time we reach it. By the time we pass over, the cars on I-215 are the size of the cars in the game of Life.

Wow! I forced myself to keep my eyes open that time, not like all the other times I’ve flown—seven times in forty-seven years.

Actually, the truth is, I don’t remember the first time I flew. It was in 1951 on a DC-10. Overseas to Paris. My father had a government contract to build some runways in Algiers, Morocco. He was a natural for the job, having served in North Africa in WW II. My mother and I flew over, alone, to join him in Algiers for the last three months of his stay. We took a boat home. I don’t remember either trip.

My other six flights were as an adult. On every one I closed my eyes with the first sense of forward movement during the takeoff, lifting the plane into the sky by my very own armrests and hardly relaxing my grip until the flight attendant announced our welcome to wherever we were headed. Fortunately for me, four of those flights were only an hour each. It just took my shoulder muscles a day or two to unknot each time. It was the flights to and from the Micronesian island of Guam that took me weeks to recover from. Fourteen hours in the air with an hour layover in Hawaii. This time I was the mother following my husband to a government job. Only, unlike my mother, I didn’t have one child to fly with. I had eight. Needless to say, I had too much to do to worry about
whether the plane crashed. Just managing three full meals, the trips to the telephone-
booth-size restrooms, changing diapers on my three youngest—I had a set of twins and
another baby thirteen months apart—was enough to distract me from any thoughts of
death. And I was four months pregnant, 

This time I am flying alone. No babies. No husband. In fact, the seat next to me
is empty—at least of any physical presence. Being of a “mystical” sort of mind-set,
thinking like that is automatic to me. No babies. No husband. Those words about
summarize my life at this moment—on the ground or in the air. In the five years since my
divorce, all my babies have gone away into adulthood or at least grade school. Now it’s
my children who are having babies. Three so far and three more this fall. I will my hands
to lie limp in my lap and try to leave my fate up to the laws of physics and God.

The plane is rocking back and forth. First one wing is up, then dipping down,
while the other tilts up. The horizon disappears out of my window and there is only blue
sky. I remember the scene from 

Even though I’m all too aware that millions of dollars worth of technology and
how much sleep the pilot got last night are really the deciding factors in my safe arrival in
Minneapolis, I pretend that my willpower adds something to the plane’s ability to stay in
the air. Suddenly there is a dropping sensation. Only a small one, like a ride at an
amusement park. Somehow I’m not amused. The bumpiness continues, increases.
They’re really not any worse than hitting potholes on an old dirt road. I try pretending I’m in a bus on a dirt road. Certainly I wouldn’t think the bumps were going to rip the bus apart. Surely someone built this plane to handle a few bumps. I watch the rivets on the wings carefully. I sincerely hope someone has taken it upon him or herself to watch the other wing.

Finally, after my scrutiny of the wing becomes boring enough that death seems a viable alternative, I take the chance of glancing below. I am just in time to catch a glimpse of the tiny ribbon of Interstate I-15 laid north and south along the Wasatch front. Then suddenly there are snowy mountain tops in my face. I can count the trees. We aren’t any farther above them than we had been above I-215 a few minutes earlier. I feel like the mountains are reaching for the plane, chasing it into the sky, pursuing it, trying to suck it back to earth with the pull of gravity. The left wing dips, and all I see is snow and trees. I hold my breath. Doesn’t the pilot know how close the trees are? This is no place to make a turn. Maybe he’s asleep already. I look over at the man in the seat across the aisle. He’s sleeping. Already?

In a very few minutes we’ve left the Wasatch behind. Below us, now, are ripple after ripple of snow-covered mountains running east and west. Their regularity is hypnotizing. I get the sense of the earth being a very slow liquid, like glass, forming waves over eons of time. Now we are leaving all mountains behind. The land below is becoming flat and then flatter. Is this Wyoming? I remember driving across Wyoming once at night. I didn’t make it. Its flatness got me then too. I crashed at a Motel 8.

Suddenly the sound of the planes engines changes, like someone’s shifting gears. I wait to hear them sputter or cut out. The sound changes again. What does it mean? I am
tempted to be frantic to know, as if knowing would control it. Then sanity returns, and I have to smile at myself for thinking that my knowing would make even the slightest difference in the world.

After a few minutes pass without us dropping out of the sky, I begin to entertain other possibilities for the change in sound. I begin to notice that I feel less pressure against my skin, in my cells. There’s more of a floating feeling. Just then a voice over the loudspeaker announces that we have reached our assigned altitude and will be cruising at 30,000 feet until we begin our descent into Minneapolis. Hmmm. Cruising? That sounds too easy. I’m not sure I like this floating feeling it gives me. I think I prefer the feeling of thrust, of pressure, of climbing. It makes me feel secure. It just feels like it should take a lot of hard work to stay up this high.

After we had been in Guam for a week or two and already lived through a half-dozen small earthquakes, my husband told me what I had not known before we moved there—that Guam is atop one of tallest “mountains” on the surface of the earth; it is approximately six miles to the bottom of the ocean not far off the island’s coast. I was terrorized by that information. Six miles! Talk about being buried “in the depths of the seas.” What if one of these quakes didn’t just shake the couch and rattle the dishes? What if one of them was a big one and we ended up being buried in the depths of the sea. Considering the scriptural precedent set for that and the prostitutes I kept riding in the elevator with, dressed in nothing under their blazer jackets, I was terrified. Then my engineer-husband sated all my fears with a bit of wisdom that only an engineer could appreciate: “What difference would it make whether you were six inches or six miles under water—you’re just as drowned.” I tried to take some solace in a similar thought.
while six miles in the air. Whether you fall from six stories or six miles in the air, you’d be just as dead. Somehow, it didn’t give me any comfort. It was the fall I was petrified of—the several minutes it would take between knowing you were going to die and actually dying.

Determined to face down my fear, I force myself to stare at the nothingness six inches ahead of wing’s edge. I’ve read about aerodynamics, about how the curved upper surface of the wings causes the air to move faster over them, creating a lower air pressure. The air below rushes to fill in the area of lower pressure, and up go the wings and anything attached to them—like me. Still, how could the nothingness of empty air be filled with this power, this force, this “magic” that creates this impossible experience? And even more puzzling to me is how humans, able to manipulate invisible forces to achieve these kinds of miraculous results, can still doubt the presence of an organizing, managing Deity. Mankind aside, I was definitely convinced and reconvinced. Flying puts me in touch with the incomprehensible.

Suddenly I am remembering the hawk I had watched in the mountains one day several summers ago, soaring effortlessly on the thermals, riding them in spiraling circles without flapping a wing. Any movement of muscle or sinew was so minimal as to be nonexistent. The hawk banked left, caught an upward current and rode it as effortlessly as I ride an elevator. “Look!” I had exclaimed to a friend. “He’s riding the winds of God.” As I continue staring through the invisible air ahead of the wing, I realize I’m doing the very same thing—riding the winds of God. I am being upheld and sustained by His Spirit—Ruwah, in Hebrew means both “wind” and “Holy Spirit”—looking down upon the earth from a perspective that He has inspired mankind to find their way to; a perspective
that He graciously shares. I think of Nephi and John and their “mountaintop” experiences.

“Let me trust Thee, dear God,” I almost forget myself and pray aloud as well as on paper. I lay my pen down, put my head back against my seat, close my eyes—this time not in terror. I let myself become aware of my breathing. Ruwah also means “breath” in Hebrew. Breath, wind, Holy Spirit. The connections weave around each other in my mind and heart. I feel that peace which “passeth understanding”\(^1\)—that makes no logical sense under the circumstances—beginning to affect my entire body. I find my whole “self” relaxing, entering a state of rest\(^2\) I have become intimately familiar with in these last eight years. It was with me at my child’s closed casket viewing, at her funeral, in the divorce court, during the lonely nights as a single parent with eight dependent-age children. It has been with me through nearly five years of college classes as I have struggled to “fulfill the measure of [my] creation”\(^3\) in ways that I have felt as called to do as I did to my motherhood. I smile at myself for not realizing I would find that same peace here, cruising at 30,000 feet.

I undo my seat belt, put my seat back and surrender totally to the truth of where I am. I let the Spirit of truth flow through me as the wind does over the wing of the plane. I am lifted to an even higher perspective. Without fear I let the truth sink into my soul that I am just as suspended between life and death—between this world and the next—on the ground as I am six miles in the air. I see that I can’t be any more secure in my own respiration or pulse than I am the pulsing of the great engines. Facing that fact rather than ignoring it, I am introduced into a consciousness of truth even deeper. I reconnect with the subliminal sense of power I had felt while the plane was still on the ground. This time,
though, I realize why the perception is only marginally connected to the sound of the engines. While this power is in the energy of combustion so concentrated and harnessed in those engines, it is more. It is the power of aerodynamic principles and more. It is the power of wind and breath and more.

I can’t control the little jerk of my diaphragm, the little breath out my nose that happens voluntarily when something humorous dawns on me. People are always saying that it’s no more dangerous to fly than to drive. I see now, that’s true as far as it goes; it just doesn’t go far enough. The truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help me God, is that it’s no safer to breathe than to fly. And you know, when you really think about it, maybe breathing is flying. Maybe taking that first mortal breath is leaping off the edge of somewhere long forgotten in the thrill of free flight.

Now, caught up in an energy that takes me to heights this plane could never reach, I am given the courage to examine other fears that I am flying from at this same moment in my life. The main one is the fear of reestablishing an intimate, possibly even a marital relationship with another man. I was kissed and I kissed someone for the first time in five years last night. I was flying as high then as I am now. I was as suspended between life and death, safety and tragedy, then as I am in this plane. Flying is a major risk; it’s true. But so is living. From where I sit, I can’t see any difference.

By now I’m so relaxed I think I might sleep, but I don’t. Who wants to sleep and waste the chance to experience this miracle? I put my chair back upright and look past the wing and the rivets and the wind. I lean the side of my forehead against the window. Tears well up in my eyes as I gaze down upon the precious earth filled with love, now that my fear is gone. In the past I had never been able to do more than glance at the fact that I
was so high. Now I am enthralled by the very same fact. I can see the sensuous, feminine curve of the horizon and I reflect at the expression "Mother Earth."

While I’ve been doing so much introspection, we have left the intermountain West far behind. The terrain we’re flying over now is not mottled with white, but is olive drab, khaki brown splattered with scores and scores of tiny little navy blue spots. Lakes? Maybe that’s where all the white went, into navy blue low spots. It is fascinating to think that the air, the sun, the pale blue horizon deepening to cobalt blue looks exactly the same here as it did over Utah and yet it isn’t the same. In the two hours that have passed we have traveled north as well as east, turning the globe diagonally beneath us.

Just then, I begin to notice that some of the larger lakes have patches of white floating in their center. Child of the West—the desert West to be exact—I have never seen ice form over large bodies of water. It is actually some scrap of textbook knowledge that comes back and reminds me that ice will stay longer over deep water and melt more quickly over shallow. Soon the lakes become larger. Many of them are ice covered, even though there is no sign of snow on the drab land between them. I marvel. With all this water, the land must be a plush carpet of green in the right season. It couldn’t be any other way. I realize then that I must be looking at miles and miles of hardwood, deciduous woods. In early March it doesn’t look any different than the sagebrush covering Wyoming.

Nevertheless, this is Minnesota. The land of 10,000 lakes. They are everywhere. There is no way that a person could walk away from them; walk away from water. There’s a lake within the wandering distance of a child in any direction. The folks here must have to teach their children to swim before they can walk.
I look at my watch. If we are still on schedule we have less than a half-hour to go. As if on cue with my thoughts, the sound of the engines changes. I look out the window. There isn’t much change in the size of the things on the ground. Our descent is very gradual. Only a few minutes before there had been absolutely no clouds. Now they are beginning to appear like scattered cotton balls. Another few minutes pass and the cotton balls are below us, crowding together, looking like the backs of fluffy sheep. I remember the pilot’s prediction for Minneapolis—“partly cloudy.”

I expect we will experience some more bumps passing through those clouds.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we are about ninety miles outside of Minneapolis. We have just been cleared for landing. In just a few minutes we will be beginning our approach. If you are continuing on in your travels today, please listen carefully to the following connections.”

I listen carefully. “Passengers continuing on to Detroit, Michigan, please go to Gate 31 on the red concourse.” That’s me.

There is the sensation of increasing weight as the plane begins its descent in earnest. I look out at the land below. Minneapolis, Minnesota is my father’s birthplace. It is the soil from which he grew, only one generation removed from his grandparents—immigrants from Ireland and Norway. Some part of the molecules in this land are in my body. I feel a very elemental attachment. I look out at the horizon. It isn’t blue any longer, it’s lavender. It’s pretty, but I suspect it’s a result of the smog over the city. We continue to lose altitude.

I am willing to stay conscious for the landing this time, to not retreat into clenched fists, closed eyes and lowered brows. I’m even willing to keep writing—no matter how
rough it gets. I remember reading somewhere that nothing—not even *moving* pictures can capture an experience like the written word. Pictures, no matter how exquisite, can’t take you inside the experience—can’t tell you how it *feels* to *be* in the experience. That’s what I want to capture as a writer. What it *feels* like to *be* in my life’s circumstances.

Suddenly the engines cut back—*way* back. It feels like they’ve been turned off, actually. It feels like we’re gliding. There’s relatively no sound. Now the sound and the motion ebb to what feels like a stop. That’s impossible. We can’t stop in mid-air. We have to be moving forward. We must be. That’s a principle of flight. Thrust creates lift. Gravity creates drag.

The wing on my side takes a deep dip. I find myself looking down at freeways, defoliated trees, a ball diamond. The wings level. There’s another change in the sound of the engines. The nose is elevated.

The right wing dips slightly. Corrects. The left wing dips. Comes level. There is an increased sense of dropping. Down goes the elevator.

There are trains, railroads, everywhere below.

I hear the sound of the landing gear going down. Suddenly the ride becomes bumpier as the air rushes into the open places in the plane’s underbelly, as it flows around the giant tires.

We are jerking and jumping around as if we are on a very rough road.

We must be cutting more and more sharply through layers of air. I keep waiting for that last straightening out to come, for there to be no more tilting and bumping. I am hanging on to the end, but I have to admit my eyes are closed. I guess I’m still afraid to watch the ground. As if my watching or not watching will make any difference in the end.
Life will happen whether I watch or not—and watching, I might actually learn from what I live through. How easy it is to forget the truth when we’re afraid.

I open my eyes. We are only ten or twenty stories off the ground.

Five, four, three, two, one.

The wheels hit, then hit again. We are back on the ground. The engines reverse. I feel myself sliding forward in my seat.

Forty miles per hour. Thirty. Twenty.

We are turning and taxiing slowly toward the terminal.

It’s at least six minutes before we come to a full halt. People immediately leap to their feet, crowd into the aisles and begin pulling things from the overhead bins. They seem anxious to leave. I sit back and wait, wondering how many of them are afraid of flying.
Notes

1 Phil. 4:7.

2 Moroni 7:3.

3 D&C 88:19.
Memoiristic
"An Imperative Duty"
(D&C 123:11)

I went to the movies last week. I saw how Jo March did it. She took out her pen and her inkwell and sat down at a table in front of a window and wrote, . . . and wrote, . . . and wrote. And when she was finished she tied the bundle of hand-written pages up with a ribbon and sent them to a publisher and didn't get one rejection slip. She wrote a story about a girl writing a story about a girl.

Maybe I can do that. Maybe I can write a story about a girl writing a story about . . .

No, at forty-six, I'd have to write about a woman writing about a woman.

I turn my back on my computer. It doesn't seem to mind. It calls up a screen saver to occupy itself. I pick up the mechanical pencil I just used to do nearly eight hours of editing and reach for one of the three-ring binders I keep class notes in.

I pull my office chair off the hard plastic rug-protector, roll it across the carpet, and seat myself at my art table--the one I haven't spilled a drip of watercolor on in five years. I look down at all the familiar, five-year-old stains. I could probably scrub them off with some sort of abrasive cleanser, but then I might forget that I was once that brave. To work in water color is not for the timid. Someday I'm going to have to paint again. I need to do that.

I take a dozen sheets of "college ruled" paper out of the binder, tap their bottom edge on the art table, and begin to write about a woman writing. One page flows out, without a single agonizing pause, and I see it's true: I needed a persona in order to write.
Why?

I don't know for sure.

Maybe because the real me is shattered, scattered. The truth is I can't guarantee that the next time I move, every cell won't fly apart and finally go its own solitary way.

Why?

I would guess it's because since there were two cells of me, I've known that it was two too many.

A strange thing to write?

Not for someone who is the product of a failed abortion.

Whose blood wasn't alcohol free from before she had arteries of her own.

Not for someone who was conceived not in love, but in need--a cellular deep need that flows through her veins even now, always burning--sometimes just stinging, but always there. Always. The need was there long before the blood, murmuring behind the walls of her mother's womb.

My son comes in to visit with me. He's just home from school. Eighth grade.

"Mom, the scale in the front bathroom's busted. I don't weigh 118 pounds."

I look over my shoulder at him, quizzically.

I have to agree with him. After all, he stands 5'10" and wears "extra large" everything.

"Are you sure?" I tease. Then I let my voice get serious.

"You are looking thinner."
I mean it. He is. He's always been a chunky child. Not quite roly-poly, but soft and round. Now, he's beginning to lose his "baby" belly. His arms and legs are taking on contours as muscles enlarge, consuming the surrounding fat as they grow. His face is getting thinner, too. It's still smooth, though, and rosy.

I don't tell him that. I don't think he'd like it.

Actually, his entire countenance possesses a warm glow beneath his olive tan--with or without sun. And it all matches perfectly his hershey eyes and his darkening hair. His hair was blond when he was six. But that was eight years ago. Eight.

He doesn't know my thoughts, or my searing need. For him, I'm talking as healthy, as warm as his complexion; as hopeful as the little boy still so near the surface of his eyes.

He smiles at my comment about him getting thinner. "Really?"

He basks in the compliment for a minute, savoring his possible manhood and then retreats into the safety of childhood. He pats his tummy through his tee-shirt, slapping Garfield right where it hurts. "Naw. It's just 'cause I untucked my shirt."

I notice he stands up a little straighter, even so. He turns to leave my room.

"Love ya, Matt," I say after him, turning back to my writing.

"Me too." He returns what has become our traditional reply to expressions of love. It means, "I love you, too." It began when my daughter, my youngest child, would say "me" in place of "I."

"Me wuv you," she would say and crawl up in my lap and give me butterfly kisses
on my ears with her eye lashes. I'd squeal and pretend to hate it.

    Alone again, I write about Matt's tummy; about Julyn's eye lashes.

    Suddenly she appears at my side. I hadn't heard her come in.

    My bedroom's grand central station, nowadays. Except when the need is raging, consuming me from within. Then I lie on my bed, hold a pillow against my heart to smother the need, and cry. At those times I close and lock the door and don't care what they watch on TV or how late they stay up.

    "Mom, I'm going to the park. Okay?" She struggles to get her second arm into her other coat sleeve. Her hair, the color of the natural-oak headboard on my bed, falls in her face. She hates it when it does that. I know. She's told me a thousand times. She thought she'd like it long and permed--but not when she has to redeem the curls from the tangles every morning, unassisted. I listen to her fuss each morning, but I don't offer to help.

    Gone are the days when my need pulled my daughters' hair to make them look good, to make them be good. It didn't work. Sunday mornings were the worst. The very worst.

    She doesn't know my thoughts or feel my need, either, thank God.

    She bends over to kiss me with her lips--not with her eye lashes. The butterflies must be busy. She waits for me to turn full face to her. I forgot. Ears only work for butterflies.

    I turn and get a close up of her blue eyes that have turned a sort of gray. That
means she's bothered. I remember hearing her on the phone in the kitchen, a few minutes earlier, demanding that her best friend's little brother go call his sister to the phone.

"You are not Melanie," she had insisted. "You're Mitch. Mitch. Go get Melanie!"

Boys can be a pain when you're nine and they're seven.

She kisses me lips to lips. By her hesitation she requires it. Sometimes cheeks, like ears, just aren't enough. But a fleeting peck, barely a touch, is.

She saw the movie with me last week. It had been a date. Just she and I. Girls' night out. First a chick-flick--Little Women--and then our favorite restaurant. A bean and cheese burrito a la carte and a "Sprite" with free refills. She always knows what she wants. Most of the waitresses do, too.

"See what I'm doing?" I take my stack of binder papers in both hands and tap them on the table top again, proudly displaying my top page, filled with penciled script. "I'm doing what Jo did."

"You're writing to Joe?" she asks, thinking of her brother who's been three weeks in the MTC.

I'm not surprised that she would think of him. It would take more than one movie to give the name "Joe" any other meaning. For a millisecond I remember her testimonies of over a year ago when her big brother was old enough for a mission but far from ready. Innocent of his shortfall, she'd walk up to the pulpit in fast and testimony meeting month after month, without any prompting, and say what was in her heart. No rote rhetoric from this family. One thing became routine, though: "And I'm thankful for my brother Joseph
going on a mission."

Sitting in the back of the chapel, in the overflow, with all the other parents who had given up the fight to control their kids—whether nineteen months or nineteen years—I had squirmed. I had seriously doubted back then that Joe would ever get ready.

He was one of the children I had, in my own turn, conceived in need and not love. Like his siblings, I needed him to be good. To sit down. To shut up. To do his work. To go to bed. To go to school. To get good grades. To get his Eagle. To stay away from girls. To stay out of trouble.

It hadn't worked.

Need doesn't breed anything except more need. My life was certainly proof enough of that.


I hold the papers up and straighten them again, putting a little more dramatic flare in it.

"You know. Jo." I lean on the rime between "know" and "Jo."

"Oh! Oh!" she exclaims. "That Jo!" You can tell she is pleased with remembering.

"Yeah, that Jo." I'm pleased too. In fourth grade, she reads and writes nearly two grade levels behind. The resource teacher has tested her and she's been officially designated "learning disabled," though they can't pinpoint how or why. It's not your usual dyslexia or attention deficit disorder. Something more subtle, elusive, puzzling.

"Yeah. That Jo. I'm gonna do like she did. I'm going to write and write until I have enough for a book, like her, and then I'm going to tie all the pages up with a ribbon
and send them away to be published."

She turns to walk away, zipping her coat as she goes. I glance over my shoulder at her back. Her hair is puckered up between her neck and her coat collar. She reaches up and runs her hand under her hair, flipping it out of the collar. Without looking back, she says matter-of-factly, "And when it's a book, I will buy a copy and cherish it and read it to all of my children."

Seriously, she said "cherish."

"Love ya, Mom," she calls back from the top of the split-entry stairs.

"Me too, " I call back, but not loud enough. She's yelling something at me.

"If Melanie calls, tell her I'm at the park." I hear the front door close.

Two hours later I have four pages written. I've covered Matt's tummy and Julia's hair. Julia's kisses.

Now it's quiet. I'm the only person in the house. Six bedrooms. Three bathrooms. And I remember the day when no one had a private bedroom, and hardly a private bath--especially not me.

Above the low electronic hum of my computer I hear past voices echo off these walls.

Actually, it's not exactly a hum the computer makes. It's more like the sound you can hear being communicated through the entire plumbing system when you've turned off the lights at night and in the near silence you realize you've left the water running in the backyard. I wonder what in the computer makes that sound, anyway. Something going
around? A fan, maybe? That's probably it. John, Joe's twin--Joe in the MTC, not Jo in the movie--is the computer whiz of our family, and he told me once that computers get really hot and have to have a little fan running to keep them from melting down or blowing up or something.

John wouldn't be going on a mission. His choices over the last two years had cinched that.

Crap. Trying to picture the source of the noise inside the computer isn't keeping the memories at bay.

Damn.

That's about the most coherent thing I remember saying that day five years ago when my oldest daughter came home from exile to tell me something that it had taken her five months of therapy to find the courage to say.

"Mom, are you home?" she called as she came up the front stairs.

"Damn." I had whispered it under my breath. All I had to do was hear her voice and the turmoil started. The struggle between fear and rage welled up in my heart. I stared down at the towels on the bed in front of me and kept folding. It had promised to be a pretty peaceful Saturday. Early summer. All the kids were either outside playing or sleeping in. And then came Karen.

Karen had blue eyes. At least that's what you thought at first glance. But then she stared at you, or you at her, and you realized that there was a mother-lode of gold in her eyes, scattered around her irises like nuggets resting at the bottom of two sunlit pools.
Unless she was mad. And then the gold seemed to shrink away. As if something stirred the gravel at the bottom of the pools and clouded the usual crystal clearness of her eyes.

Believe me, no one, and especially me, ever wanted to see that contrast between brightest sunlight and darkest shadow. Something in me shrunk away in terror from the shadows in Karen's eyes.

I'm in here, " I called, not looking up from the laundry I was folding. There were at least four loads backed up on my bed. I hated folding clothes. Towels weren't so bad. I always did them first. But then there were shirts, jeans, underwear, socks. I hated it when work backed up.

Karen was my oldest daughter--my third child. She had turned eighteen just days before she moved out, six months ago. I had given her the ultimatum: either quit staying out all weekend, using foul language around the house, and fold at least one load of laundry a day as a token effort to help the family, or get out.

She'd gotten out.

Karen didn't do anything she didn't want to do. Not a thing. At least that's what I had thought until I found her journals that late August Sunday when my second oldest daughter and I went to clear out Karen's tiny sixth of the student apartment she had shared with five roommates. We gathered her things--her curling iron, her makeup, her toothpaste, her sanitary pads, her clothes, a few dishes, a towel or two. And then I found her journals in a box under her bed. I had almost missed them. I picked up one, opened it and suddenly felt crushed by the same power that had held me up since the highway
patrolman had come to my door the night before. Now that same power sat me down to read.

"I can't stop. I can't. What am I going to do? I was clean for three days and now tonight. Oh God. I think I've met my destroyer."

But on that early summer morning of laundry folding there was no clue that we'd bury her in three months. No clue at all. And thank God. That morning had enough of a death knell to toll.

I barely glanced up as she came to the doorway of my bedroom and leaned against the door sill. "Where's everyone at?" she asked. Her voice had that sound in it that I dreaded; it meant she was tense, simmering inside, just waiting for someone to bump her just right. Which was exactly what I had a gift for--the ability to always find her trigger. And if that wasn't enough, it was only a reflection in a mirror of how she affected me. Ten minutes or twenty-five words with Karen--whichever came first--and we were fighting.

It hadn't been that way when she was little. As a baby she'd been the answer to my prayers. I had waited three babies to get my own little doll. And she had been one. Tiny, tow-headed, with a ready smile and those sparkling eyes. And double dimples on both sides. “Angel kisses,” we had called them, and I had made sure that they were never neglected.

But then something began to change. As she had grown older the tension had formed between us. She'd always been what I called "feisty." A live wire. But by puberty that wire was one short fuse and I was at a loss to understand what was happening. By
high school we were having full-fledged fights--mostly verbal, laced with stabbing words on both sides. By her eighteenth birthday, we had exchanged blows. Glancing blows, but blows nonetheless. I'm not sure the bruises will ever heal without her here to exchange amends with.

But that morning I was still too defensive to consider amends. I was grateful for the relative peace I could sustain since she had moved out. Besides, I was proud of her being independent and on her own. After all, I'd been living alone when I was seventeen and a half. Of course I hadn't had good LDS parents and a gaggle of brothers and sisters either.

"They're all out playing," I volunteered, wondering if she felt guilty, watching me fold all these clothes alone--the chore she would rather desert her family than do.

"Where's Dad?" For a second I caught a different tone in her voice--sort of lisping, slurry. I looked up to see if her eyes were bloodshot. Sure enough, they were.

Just as I had thought. She'd hung one on last night. I turned my back on her and continued folding as I answered her. "He's up at Maple Dell, with Matt and Sam on a scout activity. What'd ya want Dad for?" To hit him up for money?

I didn't say the part about the money out loud. I just thought it. I look back now and I don't know why I had such a grudging, blaming attitude toward her about the subject. Handing out money was the only parental involvement his children ever received from him.

She didn’t need to hear the words. She heard the tone, the tinge of sarcasm in
what I had said. “It’s not what you think, Mom.” Her voice was taking on a tense, defensive edge already. I felt my jaw tighten up. The energy in the room was electric. The peace was gone. Damn.

I don't remember how it came to be that she entered my room; whether she walked in of her own accord before I began to rage at her, or whether I dragged her in after I lost it. All I remember is that within ten minutes I had her backed against the wall on the far side of the room, sobbing her eyes out as I yelled at her for her rotten, ungrateful, and just plain shitty attitude. I remember she had her hands up to her face and was trying to shout me down between her shaking fingers--trying to get a word in edgewise.

"You just don't understand! You just don't understand!"

She kept repeating those words over and over, and with every repetition I got angrier.

"What in the hell do you mean? I don't understand," I ranted. How many times did I have to give her my "I-grew-up-in-the-slums-and-my-mother-was-a-whore-speech" before she figured out how lucky she was to have me--a dedicated, selfless mother. Someone who cooked and canned and cleaned and crafted sixteen hours a day and slept only with her father the other eight.

"You think you've seen something I haven't seen? You growing up in a decent LDS home. With a mother and a father to take care of you. You think you know something about this stinking world I don't know?" I challenged. "Then tell me what that
might be! Go ahead, tell me."

Gasp for breath, trembling as if her bones were about to dissolve and she was going to crumple into a heap of dirtied laundry at my feet, she finally told me what she had seen that I hadn't. What she knew that I didn't.

"Mom. Mom. Mom." She kept beginning and faltering. Something in her voice was different. New. No, old.

She sounded like the little girl I'd known before the chasm had opened up between us. She sounded like the little girl I had been before the chasm had opened up in me to protect me from what I knew that no child should ever have to know.

I heard her voice echoing across that abyss, and like a bat, flying not by sight, but by sound, I could "see" the terror in its depths. Something in me wanted to run from the familiar choking sound of it. I knew too well the sound of her anguish, of her need.

Need. Need. Need. It felt like the word was my pulse pounding at the back of my hermetically sealed mind. My heart seemed to have fled from its quiet, unobtrusive place in my chest and was pounding instead in my stomach, at the back of my neck, in my hands.

"Mom, ..." her voice failed her again.

Though my body didn't move, my soul cringed from the size of her eyes. Though logic would tell you that no eyes could get that big or look that black, logic made no difference at a moment like this. Her eyes were huge, full of terror. No feistiness, no bravado, no distracting resemblance to sunlit pools and flashing gold. Her irises were tiny
rings of light--like the corona of a hidden sun--behind her dilated pupils.

I saw myself, my mother, my grandmother who I had never even met, all reflected there; literally generations of women who had died, riveted through the heart with a tradition of their fathers--a lie that thrives on silence.

I knew before she spoke that no amount of being busy, no amount of pretending and denying was going to stop the truth from being spoken. Someone had convinced Karen she needed to tell.

Her voice had only the barest volume to it.

"Mom, . . ." She paused again. Now, she wasn't gasping for breath. Instead, she seemed frozen in the middle of a breath, terrified of the words her lips were forming. Something in me knew why she paused: she was sure that if she used this breath to tell this truth, she would never breathe again. I have often thought, since, of the little boy who gave blood to save his sister's life, convinced he would die from the act. Karen was about to risk her life for my sake. To kill the lie in me.

"Mom, . . . back before I moved out, . . . Dad came in my bedroom. He touched my breasts."

God, no. Not this.

How could you do this, God? How could you let it happen to her? How could you let her father do this? How could you let him infect her with his hideous emptiness, his groping, soul-murdering need?

I took her in my arms and she clung to me with all the terror she'd kept secret from
me and for me so long, trying so hard to follow my sterling example of longsuffering.

I half carried her to the side of my bed, where we sat down together among the nice, neat folded piles and wept until we knew we were not dead.

I've got to come up for air. I've spent years backing away from the day I would write this, and now it's one in the morning and I can't stop.

Sam just wandered down the hall to the bathroom and back to his bedroom. He has his favorite two fingers in his mouth and half of an old green basketball jersey clutched in his free hand, held close to his nose. It's silky. The jersey, not his nose. He's eleven, and the fingers and the "silky" are pretty much a thing of the night. A guard against the terrors.

"Hi, Mom," he mumbles as he stumbles past.

"Hi, Babe," I answer, glancing up from my computer.

I found myself wishing he'd reappear at my door, as he had several hours ago, before he had gone to bed. I smiled at the memory. It was sweet. Thank God for sweet moments. Then he had been wearing his big sister's old ski goggles upside down and a toy army helmet on his head, in his hands a plastic, camouflage-colored automatic machine gun held in battle ready position. After a salute, which I had returned, he informed me that he was assigned to guard me from the enemy. I didn't feel right telling him it was too late.
“Train Up A Child”
(Proverbs 22:6)

It was August. Late August. It was late in the day as well as the month. Later than I realized.

At 9:15 p.m. the sky was still light outside the open window above the bathtub. Have you ever noticed how the sun seems to cling to each day of summer? In winter it hurries across the sky as if embarrassed by its lukewarm weakness, shuttling quickly past in order to escape from our sight. In summer, though, the sun rules the heavens and gives up to the night as reluctantly as the myriad of children that fill my secure Mormon neighborhood.

If fact, if it hadn’t been a Saturday evening—the one evening of the week when every mother in every home on my street calls their kids in early to bathe in preparation for the Sabbath—I would have probably been alone in the house when the doorbell rang. I would have been sewing, or cleaning, or baking, or on the phone talking hope in Christ to a fellow mortal who, like myself, was struggling with the effects of addictive behavior in their own life or in the life of a loved one. As a lay counselor, I have shared a lot of such support over the years and received tenfold as much as I have shared. Thank God, That night I would definitely need it.

Since it was a Saturday evening, I wasn’t alone in the house. In fact, all of my children under sixteen—eight of them to be exact—had finally come straggling in from
“hide-n-seek” and “follow the judge to court” and were now watching a video, waiting for their turn in the tub—youngest to oldest.

Meanwhile, I was on my knees, my gut pressed against the side of a tub boiling with bubbles and bath water, trying to keep the shampoo out of my youngest child’s eyes as I lathered her hair. Shiny and slithery with soap, she slid around in the six inches of water like a little eel, not cooperating at all.

Behind me, at the closed door, came another demanding knock. I fully expected to hear my five year old’s lisping voice, insisting again that I open the locked door—never mind the four times I had already told him it wasn’t his turn yet. In the background I could hear the familiar sound of a Disney refrain—Mary Poppins.

I was about to yell at him again, "Samuel! Go watch TV. I told you already, we'll be done in a minute.” Then I realized that this time it was my fourteen year old knocking.

"Mom. You need to come. There's someone at the door that wants to talk to you. I think it's important."

"Ouch! Ouch!" My three-year-old was putting her bubble covered fists up to her eyes, trying to rub the shampoo out of them.

"No! No!" In exasperation, and with a clobbering sense of fatigue, I raised my voice at her. Great. Whoever was on the front doorstep just below the open window was sure to have heard that tone of voice. The barely contained anger. What if it was someone from my ward?
Well, too bad. In defiance to whoever it was even being on my doorstep at such an ungodly hour on Saturday night, I made no attempt to hurry. Let them wait. Or better yet, go away. Calmly, I turned the tap on, adjusted the temperature and wrestled Julia onto her back. I did lower my voice, though.

"Lay back, Julia. Relax. The water will wash the shampoo out of your eyes. Put your hands down. Stop struggling."

Still crying, she complied. The cries quickly subsided to whimpers and I sat her up.

"Mom! Mom!" Now it was my ten year old's voice at the door. "You need to come to the door, Mom."

"I know. I know. I'm coming as fast as I can."

I lifted Julia over the edge of the tub, stood her on the already half saturated bath mat and started drying her hair.

"It's a policeman, Mom." My fourteen-year old's and ten-year old's voices came through the door in unison. I could tell they were both standing outside the bathroom door with their faces pressed against it.

My heart sunk through my stomach. "Oh, crap," I muttered. I draped the towel around Julia's shoulders and climbed to my feet. The knees of my jeans were wet.

A policeman. Another policeman.

The arrival of policemen at our house was becoming an all-too-frequent occurrence.
The first time had been last fall when I had made the decision to report my eight-year-old's bruises to the police. After all, his back and face were covered with them. The outline of his sister Karen's open fingers were raised in welts among the already bluing circles where her fists had connected. It seemed that while her dad and I were attending the temple that morning she had awakened with a hangover from the combination of alcohol and drugs she had used the night before, discovered three dollars missing from her dresser, and singled Matt out as the culprit. However unsteady she was on her feet, she had had enough coordination to find him, catch him and pound him mercilessly.

Worse than the bruises on Matt’s skin was the look in his eyes when I found him curled up on his bed, sobbing. All his life, he had adored Karen. He was her special baby brother. She had been eleven when he was born. It had been her that had voluntarily taken care of him every afternoon for the first six months of his life. From the minute she came home from school until bedtime she was within arm’s reach of him, walking the floor with him, rocking him, kissing his little newborn face and whispering condolences over and over. "It's okay, Mattie. It's okay." A little fire-brand already at eleven, she was idealistic and super-achieving. School, soccer, Primary, housework, baby-tending. The oldest daughter, she excelled at it all. And I let her.

"It'll be otay, Mattie," she would croon baby talk to him. Apparently she convinced him. He settled in and began to thrive, even though he was the tenth child born into our family in twelve and a half years. I know he thrived, at least in part, because of Karen's constant attention. They had developed an extraordinary bond that, in these last
months, her addiction was swiftly destroying. He, more than any other sibling, was traumatized by her weekend-long disappearances followed by her fits of cruel sarcasm and rejection of the family.

Then came the morning of the missing money, the absent parents, and the cruel beating. For months I had begged her, told her, warned her: I will not put up with any really serious trouble. I had called the police.

It hadn’t been an easy decision, either. On our street, the appearance of a policeman was good for months of reminiscence and outright gossip. In the eight years we’d lived in this house, the only other time a policeman had stopped on our street was almost three years ago. It was the night the Bingham’s son, Brian, had fallen out of the tree where he had hidden during a summer night game. He had fallen, hit his head on a retaining wall and nearly died. The doctors said later that he would have died if it had not been for his mother Nancy’s instinctive sense of trouble which had sent her from house to house looking for him.

No such instinct troubled me this Saturday night.

It had again been Karen’s behavior that had brought the police to our home a second time. Several months after the day she had beaten Matt, I had called them to ask what to do with the bong-pipe I had found under her mattress. I hadn’t been looking for trouble that day either. I had just finally given up waiting for her to change her sheets—something she had been neglecting to do for weeks. The dispatcher said they would send an officer out to pick up the pipe and take a report from me. I had no idea when I called
the police station that that was the standard procedure. I offered to bring it down to the police station. The young woman on the phone firmly refused my offer.

The officer in his squad car had been parked outside within minutes of my call. I guess in Orem, Utah, police aren't as busy as they are in other places. Maybe he had just been cruising by, making sure the latest snow was shoveled off the sidewalks.

Then there was the third time a policeman came to our door, just last Tuesday, four days ago. The doorbell had rung about three in the afternoon. As I stood there conversing with the tall, slim man in the dark blue uniform, in his badge and buckles, his black leather belt and holster shining in the August sun, herds of elementary school age children were passing by, just coming home from year-round classes. Noisy and boisterous, glad to be let out of hot classrooms, they usually would have reverted to shoelessness and started several water fights as they meandered towards their respective homes. Apparently, that particular day they weren't noisy or bored enough to start any fights. In fact, they were relatively quiet as they coagulated into little groups along the edge of my front lawn. Some were peering into the interior of the gleaming white police car, duly awed by its gold lettering; the bank of blue, red and yellow lights fastened across its roof; and the caging that separated the front seat from the back. My nearest neighbors' kids, made bold by years of shared family life, stood at the bottom of my front steps, side by side with my own grade-schoolers.

The officer acted impatient, disapproving. He had come to tell me that he was looking for my son, Matthew. He went on to tell me that apparently Matthew had taken
off on another child’s bike from the school grounds about twenty or thirty minutes ago. The parents of the other kid were enraged and demanded that the police department find the thief. He was coming to tell me that they had found the bike just around the corner from the school, abandoned carefully on someone's lawn. They had found no sign of Matt, but eye witnesses had identified him positively. While there wouldn’t be any charges pressed this time, if it happened again the parents wanted me to know they would do just that.

If it happened again? I had been shocked at the other people’s reasoning. It wasn't like Matthew had a history of acting like this, of stealing anything from anyone, much less them exclusively. Why would they think he’d do it to them, again? Were three visits from the police in less than a year earning our entire family a reputation?

Matthew had come home about an hour later, sneaking in the downstairs basement door. He had crept to his room and hidden under his covers—just like he had the day of the beating.

And now, for the fourth time in less than a year, there was a policeman waiting for me at my front door.

As I unlocked the bathroom door and emerged into the hall, I looked toward the TV room off of the kitchen to see if Matt was there. He wasn't. I wondered if he were hiding again. I wondered if he had stolen another bike.

Or maybe it was Karen who was in trouble. Since she had moved out six months ago, I hadn't had much contact with her. Even after the day just a few weeks ago, when
she had come home to tell me about the sexual abuse from her father, the day we had sat in the piles of clean towels on my bed and wept over the loss of her innocence and my ignorance, we hadn’t seen much of each other.

I had held her that day and whispered to her, "It'll be all right, Karen. It'll be all right," in the same tone she had once used with Matthew. She had clung to me and sobbed. If she had been any smaller I would have pulled her into my lap and rocked her.

I turned the corner from the hallway to the top of the split-entry stairs and looked down at the two figures standing in the now-gathering gloom of my front doorway. The sun had given up its hold on the evening and finally admitted its need to be done. Where had it gone? Only moments before there had been that warm, pink alpine glow that characteristically casts across Utah Valley from the west against the east mountains in the evening. Now it was totally gone. The August night air was still full of warmth, though. I could feel it battling with the air conditioning to get in through the open doorway.

There were no lights on in the house, either. My little girl, clad only in the towel, and all seven other children—Matthew wasn't hiding—were standing around me, or kneeling on the couch that backed against the black wrought-iron railing that separates the entry from the living room. They peered down over the back of the couch and the railing like the "peanut gallery" I often called them.

Both of our cats, usually relegated to the outdoors, had taken this opportunity to come indoors. Gingerly, probably surprised at having no children scoop them up to toss them out or maul them, they circled the men's legs and began to climb the stairs. The
glow and sound from the TV seemed to flow around the corner into the living room and down the stairs at my feet.

Two men stood on the step. One I recognized. The other was in uniform.

"Katherine?" It was my bishop's counselor who spoke first.

I was confused. Relief that it wasn't some irate father accompanying the policeman clashed with bewilderment about why Brother Dunn was there at all. My mind was searching desperately for some sense in what was happening. As I look back, it feels as if the events were already taking on a slow, surrealistic motion, as if some part of me knew what was coming and was trying to postpone it.

"Katherine," Brother Dunn began again without waiting for me to acknowledge him. That's the first moment I caught the urgency in his manner, in his voice. Time slowed down even further. It seemed like it took me several minutes to descend the half dozen stairs.

"Is your husband home, Katherine?" Something about his question stopped me on the bottom step. I still stood slightly above them. Some of my children had trailed me down the stairs.

"No. He's still out of town on a business trip. He'll be home in the morning."

"Wow! Look at all the badges!" one of the children hanging over the railing exclaimed. "How come you have so many badges?"

Hearing my child's question and then seeing the uncomfortable half-smile of the uniformed man standing beside Karl, I was suddenly aware of something else that did not
compute. He wasn't dressed like any of the policemen I'd met before. He wasn't wearing a holster and gun, or a night stick. His uniform was brown, and it definitely was decorated with a lot of ribbons. He held a hat in his hand which he turned a couple of times before looking up. His gaze met mine and I caught a glimpse of something I didn't want to know.

"Katherine." It was Karl speaking again. Still trying to get through the thickness of the congealed time that was threatening, already, to grind to a complete halt.

"I'm sorry, Katherine. If Glen isn't home, I'm afraid we'll have to talk with you."

Maybe Matt had stole Brother Dunn's son's bike. No. Dunn's son was only four.

Maybe Matt had stole Dunn's bike.

Why was he here?

Why was he with a highway patrolman?

_Utah Highway Patrol._ The beehive emblem on the man's shoulder finally registered on me.

No. This wasn't about Matthew and any stolen bikes. It had to be Karen. Maybe she'd been picked up for drug use. They had her in custody. I could handle that.

For the first time the highway patrolman spoke.

"Could I please have your full name?" he asked.

"Of course." I told him my full name.

"Mrs. Bernhard, I need to confirm that you are the mother of Karen Louise Bernhard?"
"I am."

Maybe they had her for possession...trafficking...

Maybe she had been in an accident.

Maybe she was in the hospital.

In a millisecond I was in each one of those projected scenarios—talking to her across a desk at the police station; sitting by her hospital bed, holding her hand; waiting outside ICU; bringing her home in a wheelchair ...

"Mrs. Bernhard, I regret to inform you ... "

There wasn't a sound in the house. Had someone turned off Mary Poppins?

"Just a spoon full of sugar makes the medicine go down..."

No. It was still playing away. Playing away.

"... that your daughter, Karen Louise Bernhard, ..."

His words were clipped, short, to the point, sharp, practiced, chosen—like the moves of a heart surgeon trying to cut only as deep as he absolutely had to.

"... was killed in an automobile accident on I-15 at a approximately 5:15 this afternoon."

I don't remember what I did then. What I said or how I gestured with my hands or with my face. And I don't remember with my conscious mind, but I know I heard some of the gasps that escaped several of my children.

"Karl," I heard someone say. "Please, hold me." I stumbled off the bottom step and Brother Dunn put his arms around me. I felt mildly surprised that he could see or hear
me. I stared over his shoulder at the stars that were beginning to appear in the evening sky. My soul felt like a computer on search, scanning the entire universe. Where was she? Where was my child? She wasn't gone. She couldn't be. She had to be somewhere under those same stars.

It would have been one thing had it been a grandparent or a friend who had died without my knowing it for all of these hours, but my daughter? I couldn't comprehend that for over four hours now I had been in the world, while she was not. I had gone on breathing, eating, talking, laughing, worrying over bills and when I would get my handouts for Primary done.

Shouldn't a pit have formed in my stomach four hours ago? Or at least a twinge of nausea as she died? Shouldn't it have felt like someone was peeling away a piece of my soul? Shouldn't a shiver have gone down my spine as she passed? You know, like they show in the movies. I mean, even Lassie has more sensitivity, more intuition. I mean she knows when there's even a quiver in the fabric of her loved ones' lives.

But not me. No, not me.

The front of my wet shirt, the knees of my wet jeans, suddenly chilled me.

Numb, I looked from the stars to the porch lights. Every porch light on my street was on. And more lights were coming toward me. Cars were pulling up from every direction, parking up and down both sides of my street. I could see figures walking toward me in the dark. Neighbors. Ward members.

It sort of reminded me of the night Nancy's boy, Brian, had fallen and almost died.
"From Generation to Generation"
(2 Nephi 25:16)

1

"Hello?"

I always marvel at the pleasantness with which I wake up, even in the middle of the night. The phone can ring once, and if it’s by my bed, I answer it out of a dead sleep with a warm, present, “Hello.” I sound like I’ve been sitting up just waiting for the call.

"Hi, Mom, this is Meredith." I switch on my bedside light. I have to reach for it at an awkward angle. It’s a tall, metal pole lamp, positioned between the edge of my bed and the edge of my desk less than a foot away. Since my divorce three years ago and my return to full-time school as well as full-time writing and editing, I no longer have a desk in my bedroom. I have a bed in my office.

"Oh, hi, Babe." I’m speaking to my second daughter—actually my oldest daughter now since her sister Karen’s death. I still can’t comprehend that Merry, as we had always called Meredith, was, at twenty-one, three years older than Karen, who’d always be eighteen and nothing more.

"Are you writing, Mom?" I glance at my wristwatch lying on the headboard of my bed. Three in the morning. I don’t own an alarm clock—I don’t need one. I’ve never been able to get my mind to stay still long enough to need one. Five hours of sleep is the most my body will handle; some biological clock has it timed almost to the minute. To bed at ten, up at three. To bed at eleven, up at four. To bed at midnight, up at five. You
get the idea. To be up at three a.m. writing or studying was routine for me. And my children—including Merry on the other end of the chilly phone—know it.

“No. No. I gave up the chase at midnight.”

Merry had left for work last night at ten, grumbling about being stuck with another graveyard shift at the Conoco around the corner from our house. Apparently, she believed me when I’d half-heartedly told her as she left that I’d be up all night doing homework.

Doing homework during the day wasn’t possible for a single parent of ten—even if half of them were out of the home. But I didn’t do the all-night thing so well anymore, either. Not like I did during the sixteen years between my first baby and my last. While admittedly only a pittance, the five hours of sleep my body afforded me was absolutely essential to keep me functioning. The lack of any variation reminded me of my cheap laptop that gave me about two minutes warning between full power and “hibernation mode,” when the screen blacks out and the CPU’s fan whines audibly as it keeps the processor cool.

I sit up on the side of the bed. Crumpled sheets of paper rustle around my feet.

I had spent most of the prior day editing—rewriting, really—a journal article by a professor on “Fiscal Policy in Small Rural Hospitals.” It— the rewriting part—hadn’t come easy. It still isn’t done. Then I realize that my creative writing assignment isn’t done either. I wasn’t sure whether writing about fiscal policy and rural hospitals had used up the muse in my heart or scared it away. I certainly felt I had nothing “creative” left; it was on the wadded papers around my feet, giant popped-corn kernels salted with my vain attempts at sorting out rural doctors and their fiscal responsibilities.
“How are you doing, Babe?” I ask easily, lightly. Considering that she’s been “tending store” all night and that it’s only her fourth night on the job, she sounds amazingly chipper herself.

“I’m pretty good. This last couple of hours are so long, though.” She draws out the “so” and the “ah” in “long” for emphasis, I’m sure.

“I bet.” I rub the sleep from my eyes, sincerely trying to feel for her. But my mind keeps wandering back to the two pages—not all of my efforts were crumpled up—of writing I salvaged yesterday. I climb out of bed and move to my chair, a slight groan escaping my lips. At forty-five, it isn’t so easy unfolding anymore. I grope with my big toe for the switch on the plug strip under my desk containing my computer’s vital cords. My hard drive beeps and blinks to life.

Merry’s voice continues. “John just left. He came in again to visit. He hung out with me for awhile. I can count on him to show up for the free donuts at three.”

John is Merry’s younger brother, twenty years old.

I keep thinking about the rural hospitals, their financial policies—the writing I did yesterday. Or rather, didn’t do. What if this morning is like yesterday? What if nothing happens? What if even the two pages I wrote yesterday make no sense this morning. What if I’m still at ground zero? What if today, instead of writing, I spend my day running. Running back to what twenty-three years of homemaking programmed me to do—errands, housework, laundry, phone calls. I couldn’t walk into class this evening empty-handed. My professor is expecting both rural hospitals and my creative writing assignment. And I have neither.
Merry’s unaware that she’s lost me. “Yeah, John and I had a good talk,” her voice continues. “Really good.”

I’m tempted to make that little snort through my nose, the kind you make when something cracks you up. Somehow it seems crazy. Who knows how many Family Home Evening lessons in twenty-three years I gave on communication to either a room of stony, silent faces or a boiling cauldron of snarling children. I shake my head. Twenty-three years of Family Home Evening lessons and Personal Private Interviews (a Mormon mother’s version of Personal Priesthood Interviews, conducted without the participation of the father) and my children find “good talk” with their siblings at three in the morning between selling cigarettes and coffee to other nocturnal types.

Hmmm. Merry and John had a good talk at three in the morning between checking ID to sell beer and cleaning out the hot-dog roaster. Maybe I could turn that into an essay, I thought. Maybe I could contrast John and Merry’s dark-of-night conversations with the scenes of their childhood confrontations.

“Yes. Did you know that today is John’s little girl’s birthday?”

Merry’s words jerk my head up.

“No. Meredith, I didn’t realize that.” Had a year already passed since that day in the kitchen?

2

I had spent that entire morning in the kitchen trying to undo the damage a week of midterms had done to my Molly-Mormon Mother mentality, shreds of which still held on
even after three straight years of college—spring, summer, fall and winter. Seven days of Cap’N Crunch, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and Pizza Hut, bean-and-bacon soup and a constant supply of chocolate chip cookies produced by my ten and twelve year olds (you learn how to bake chocolate chip cookies in this family before you learn the “Articles of Faith”) can leave a kitchen pretty thrashed.

I stood at the counter trying not to knock any of the dirty dishes, soup cans, or empty cereal boxes off as I struggled to fold the pizza boxes in half so they would fit in a “tall kitchen” size garbage bag without ripping holes in it and making it worthless. I hated how pizza boxes did that. I hated how they required their own special trip to dumpster in the garage. I was determined they wouldn’t this time.

“Hi, Mom.”

“Hi, John.” I spoke without looking up, caught as I was in the battle of the boxes. Instantly, though, I knew something wasn’t right. There was no sound of his footsteps coming into the room. There was no expected next comment, no word play. Clever, joking word play was John’s specialty. Reading three grades ahead of his age since kindergarten, he was never at a loss for something to say, no matter what the subject or circumstance. Now, in the kitchen there was so much silence and for a millisecond I thought I might have been imagining the words I thought I heard. Still lying on the boxes with my upper body, trying to break them in half once and for all, I looked up at him.

He stood just inside the dining room end of the kitchen. At six-foot-one, 185 pounds, he was what might be called a “hunk.” His dark-blond hair was short, missionary-cut. His huge blue eyes were ... filled with tears. His cheeks were wet. His nose was
red.

Something inside of me cracked. The image of a nineteen-year-old Mormon boy standing in his mother’s kitchen crying just wasn’t right. He needed to be staring at me out of a snapshot, standing next to his companion, his arm around a dripping wet convert or two—all of them dressed in white.

Instead John stood there in my kitchen, looking like someone had just shot him. You know that look that comes over Mel Gibson’s face in Hamlet, when he turns to his friend and says, “I’m dead, Horatio. I’m dead.”

It’s the look I had on my face the day four years ago when Karen came home sober enough to tell me the truth about her dad’s incest. It was the look I had on my face the day four months later, when the Highway Patrolman told me she had been killed in an accident. It was the look on Meredith’s face when she handed her baby over to its adoptive parents a couple of years back. It’s the look that people get when they’re compelled to face the truth and the truth feels deadly.

As soon as our eyes met John found his voice. “Mom, Debbie had her baby two days ago.”

I stood and let the pizza boxes begin to unfold.

Before I could say anything, John spoke again. His voice was barely audible. “They didn’t call me. They didn’t call me.” He repeated it over and over. “They said I could come to the hospital and see the baby, but... they didn’t call me.”

For a moment my mind struggled to keep the truth at bay one more time. No! No! Midterms, single parenthood, five children under eighteen still to raise, this creepy-
crawly kitchen, the pizza boxes, the price of wasted “tall kitchen” bags. Surely that was enough reality for one woman to deal with in a day!

John kept repeating each sentence two or three times, wringing out each word like an obsessive-compulsive person might wring their hands. “They told me I could see the baby, Mom. They didn’t keep their word.” I cringed away from the truth, from who “they” were who had not kept their word: LDS Social Services and Debbie’s Stake President father and model Mormon mother.

I was the first parent to know eleven months ago about John and Debbie’s baby. I had found a note John had dropped in the bathroom, a note written to him in Debbie’s hand:

“Dear John,” it began. “It’s for sure. I’m going to have our baby. Yours and mine. I know Heavenly Father wants us to have this baby. We’ll have so much fun with him. Or maybe, it will be a ‘her.’ No matter what, together, we’ll be a family.”

I had taken the note to John and invited him to bring Debbie over that evening to talk. He did. They came. We talked. We talked about mistakes. About recovery from a seriously unwise choice. We talked about the Atonement of Christ.

Debbie was petrified that I might tell her parents. I assured her that I wouldn’t. It was, after all, her responsibility. It was three weeks later before she could finally get up the courage to talk to them. John was afraid her father would lose it even worse than an occasion a couple of months before, when he had yanked her out of her chair at the dinner table and threw her against the wall for refusing to eat the dinner her mother had prepared.
A few days after she told them, her father called and asked if John and I would come to his home so that we could all sit down and discuss this “very embarrassing and painful situation.”

Two days later, John and I arrived at the scheduled summit on time. Because of my divorce, there was no pretense of a father to cover up that I had always been a single parent, even when married.

Debbie’s father was certainly no pretense. He was the real McCoy. The successful Mormon priesthood-holder patriarch.

His wife—a darling little lady, really—sat on the couch on one side of their tastefully decorated living room. She sat, sphinx-like, as her husband stood in front of the fireplace and delivered a masterful talk on the subject of agency and morality. It would have made a fabulous seminary video. I kept fantasizing that any moment his stony-faced wife would cough or blink, and we’d have a chance to rest before another take, a chance to pretend that life was fine. again.

But ‘fine’ had been months ago and obviously no one had interrupted the scene or rewritten the script.

3

“They what?” I repeated myself at least twice. “They what?” I still couldn’t believe my ears. Of course the child had been Debbie’s baby. But she was John’s baby, too.

I thought we had come to that consensus the last time we had met with them at the
Social Services office. On that occasion John had read a three-page, single-spaced letter to Debbie and her family, apologizing for what had happened. He had wept then, too, and expressed his willingness to accept her family’s decision to put the baby up for adoption. He told them of his gratitude to them for treating him so well during the past year he and Debbie had dated. Towards the end of the letter, he could hardly read through his tears as he expressed his concern about Debbie’s safety during the pregnancy and the baby’s safe birth. I wept as I listened. I felt the witness of the truth—that John had at least the rudimentary beginnings of a genuine fatherly love. I ached that it had to emerge as a result of such hopeless circumstances.

The social worker and the father had nodded and assured John that they understood. Debbie’s mother had sat absolutely still, though her cheeks were moist with tears. That time, it had been Debbie who had appeared like a statue, staring straight ahead, emotionless and cold.

I left the pizza boxes unfolding on counter and crossed the kitchen to reach for the phone. “What’s the hospital’s number?” I started to open the drawer where the phone book was kept. “Better yet, I’ll call the Social Services . . .”

John’s voice stopped me cold. “It’s too late, Mom. They already sent the baby away. She’s gone. Her parents picked her up the same day.”

The same day! How could they do it all so quick? Didn’t it take a day or two to give away a baby for eternity?

I looked up again at John’s stricken face. “And Debbie left for Europe this morning, with her mom.”
“Yep.” Merry was still talking to me on the phone. “And tomorrow will be two years since I gave Bear up.” “Bear” was Merry’s pet name for her own little girl.

I was too overwhelmed to come up with a proper reaction. “Oh really? Has it been that long?” My tone was Sunday-School-polite, Relief-Society-reserved. A little prayer would have been more appropriate. Something like, “Oh God. Merry. Has it been that long already?” After all, she was talking about her own flesh and blood. My own flesh and blood.

I guess one’s psyche can only hold so much pain, and then the mind does something to cope. It shuts down. It creates another persona. A mask. A facade.

Meredith’s voice is as fake, as “fine” as mine. She takes her cues well. The old don’t-feel, don’t-talk rule is not dead in our house. “Well, I’d better get back to cleaning up. I still have to mop. I’ll see you in a little while.”

“Okay, kiddo. See ya too.”

I hang up the phone and put on my robe. Merry calls it my “Moses robe.” I have to admit that with its solid turquoise color, broken only by a vertical band of black down the center front, set between two stripes of white, it does look a little biblical. I feel blessed to have my mind turned to Moses. After all, he was an adopted child, separated from his blood relations and look how significant his life turned out to be.

I turn on the computer and call up the two pages left over from yesterday. I read through the description of hospital finances when my mind wanders again as I feel the
warmth from the heater vent on my feet under the desk.

5

“Last night was a ‘Last Days’ night, weatherwise—one that sets at least one Mormon in three to pondering and pontificating about the change of seasons predicted in the scriptures. Even though it’s the first week in March, last night was so warm it could have been an early summer evening. People were wearing only shirt sleeves at nine.

This morning, though, the weather’s taken a reassuring retreat into normalcy; the sky is solid clouds, gray on gray. In the little snatch of distance angled between the roofs across the street, the bottom edge of an especially dark cloud is blurred against the lower portion of the dark mountains, like water color painted wet into wet. It was raining over on the east bench.

From the look of the sidewalks in front of the house across my street, it’s rained here too. But it’s either been a while since it stopped or it hadn’t been much to begin with. The cement is only dark in splotches. Anywhere there is the slightest shelter from the sky—under the edge of parked cars for instance—it’s perfectly dry.

My feet, tucked under my art table, are bathed in a blast of warm, reassuring air. Forced air heat. It’s such a luxury, protecting us from the gray and the wet. Set on an automatic timer, it kicks in just in time to keep us from the discomfort of the season’s reality. Ever-vigilant for our sake. Taking care of us. Once in a while, the house will get chill before the heater realizes it. Then someone will “crank” the thermostat up.

Obediently, the dumb machine comes on and stays on. Fifteen minutes later, someone else
will yell, “My heck! Why’s it so hot in here?” Their eyes open wide when they see the thermostat in the hall. “Who set it on 80?!”

No one ever answers.

My feet are starting to feel hot. I pull them away from the vent. It takes a lot of heat coming out of the floor to raise the temperature in the entire house a degree or two.

I could never figure out how my children survived under the sheet or blanket tents they would make over the blasting vents on cold mornings. I would hear the heater running but feel no heat and find, upon checking, that there was a corpse-like figure, completely shrouded, laid over every vent. If it was only a sheet they had dragged off their bed it would be billowing and rippling like a hot-air balloon, beginning to fill.

When I’d find them like that, I’d seldom scold them. It reminded me too much of the early mornings my cousin and I spent huddled over a heater vent eating crackers we’d sneaked out of my aunt’s kitchen.

6

“No! No! Not those! Those!” My cousin’s voice would rise above a whisper, risking waking up the adults in the house and spoiling our early morning raid on the kitchen. She had to speak up, though, so I could hear her over the sound of the heater as it blew hot air under her nightgown as she sat on the vent. Besides, she wanted me to come back with the right crackers. Not Saltines. Saltines were for lunch with soup, with an adult hovering around. Ritz were for sneaking in the morning and pirating away to your secret place under the hardwood dining table amidst a forest of equally quality-
crafted wooden chair legs—no chrome plated cheap stuff like at my house—topped with a flurry of floral seat covers, coordinated with the curtains at my aunt’s kitchen windows and the wallpaper on the walls.

“Now, get the cheese out of the refrigerator.” Janet, at seven, was a great slave driver. At four and a half, I was the perfect slave.

I opened the refrigerator twice my height, and stared in awe at the crammed interior. I didn’t know it was possible to have so much food in your home. It wasn’t right to keep so much food when others were going hungry, was it? Hungry. I knew the definition for that. Nothing to eat. Nothing clean to wear. Hungry.

But that was back at my house in Rio Linda, California, a little rural area on the northeast perimeter of Sacramento. For the moment, I was over the rainbow, down the rabbit’s hole, through the looking glass. I was at my Aunt and Uncle’s home in San Mateo, just outside of Oakland, California.

At four years old, I had no idea how many miles lay between my world and my cousin’s, but I did know it might as well have been on another planet. A planet where, about twice a year—in the summer and at Christmas—my dad and mom would pretend to belong. They would stop drinking and fighting long enough to spend a few days with his sister, Lois; her husband, Walt; and their two children, Bobby and Janet. My dad and mom would dress me—the child they had conceived out of wedlock; the child that was proving a poor excuse for a marriage; the child that was absorbing all the blame for their hatred and shame for their misery—in newly purchased pajama’s on the way out of Rio Linda.
“If it hadn’t been for that damned brat, I’d have never married you, you filthy bitch! How in the hell do I know she’s even mine?! You’re such a whore!” My father’s words to my mother weren’t always civil.

At least I guess he was my father. I couldn’t be any surer than he was. Equally drunk, my mother had her own version of how if it hadn’t been for him, the s.o.b., and the damned pregnancy she’d have been on her own, too, footloose and fancy-free.

Of course they never yelled at each other or at me like that when we made our pilgrimages into the normalcy of the world of Lois-Walt-Janet-and-Bobby in the galaxy of San Mateo.

At my Aunt and Uncle’s house I would explore their home and pore over the photographs that covered the walls—pictures of Lois and Walt’s wedding, pictures of Janet and Bobby, both planned and treasured children.

Bobby, at eleven, was seven years older than me. His bedroom looked like something out of Leave It To Beaver. Since he was eleven and I was only four, his room was off-limits to me for two reasons: I was a girl and I was a baby. He was convinced I could never be trusted to keep my four-year-old deprived hands off all his untouchable stuff—his models, sports equipment, scouting gear, Erector-set, chemistry set, his trophy for Little League and his clarinet—not to mention his brand new phonograph and growing collection of singles—saucer size 45’s with huge holes in the middle. It was the all-around, all-American, upper-middle-class, pre-pubescent boy’s room. His room was a portion of Never-Never land I had no permission to enter. Ever.

Janet was different. When I came to visit, by default I had a temporary guest’s
pass into her world of pink and lace. After all, I was a girl and I had to sleep somewhere while visiting. She always shared her full-sized, canopied, dust-ruffled bed with me. For those few precious nights she and I would pick a dozen of her Little Golden Books from the hundreds on her book shelves and snuggle down between the fresh sheets to read—she in one of her dozen nightgowns and I in my new pajamas, which still bore telltale department store creases.

Back in my world, the clothes I played in all day worked fine, most nights, for putting myself to bed in. I guess, being my parents’ only child, it was easy for them to get lost in their own concerns and forget such things as nightgowns, baths, and bedtimes—or sometimes to even come home.

7

I hear the front door of my house open. It’s Meredith coming home from the Conoco. Her roller blades make a moment’s noise on the tile floor in the split entry. Ever since the weather turned warm she’s been rollerblading the six blocks to work and back.

Supposing I’m awake by the lamplight in the window outside, she calls to me before going downstairs to her room, “Mom, I’m home!”

“Good, I’m glad!” I call back, pausing for a second over the sentence I just wrote about being an only child, easy to forget. Luckily, or maybe blessedly, I ended up having enough children I couldn’t forget. They take turns reminding me.

I take a few minutes to scan the pages I’ve written. I need to take a shower. I
can’t believe how physical remembering is. Visceral.

I also need to clean the kitchen. Though I don’t have midterms as a current excuse, I’ve done a great job of finding reasons to resort to fast-food, carry-out, and TV dinners. I’m glad to think I use my Stafford Loan money to feed my family a varied diet.

I need to take the half dozen calls backed up on my voice mail from yesterday.

Before I can reach for the phone, I hear a voice from behind me. “Mom, can I get in your bed?”

Meredith stands in the doorway, her face red and wet, streaked with mascara. Strands of long dark brown hair have escaped the scrunchie at the back of her neck and are stuck to her wet cheeks. Her forest-green sweatshirt with green plaid letters spelling “BYU” across her chest is hidden behind the arm full of baby blankets and baby clothes she clutches to her heart.

This time I can’t push away her pain, as I did on the phone earlier. It lies scattered across my bedroom in the form of little sleepers and tee-shirts she drops as she stumbles past me, shoved from behind by the memories that haunt her.

“Mom, she was my baby. My baby’s gone. Oh God, Mom.” Her voice is muffled by the covers she’s pulled over her head.

I lie down next to her shaking form and pull the edge of the covers back so I can caress the crown of her head. I fix my eyes on the poster hanging on the wall across from the foot of my bed.

Starting at the top, set against a black background, is a rainbow of printed words. They begin with “And thou shalt call his name Jesus, . . .” in yellow, and end with “The
Alpha and Omega” in royal purple. It is a list of names and terms for the Christ. In the very center, in bold, plain, white, two words stand off the paper. “I AM.”

Once again I remember why I’m a mother. I am a mother because I AM. It is my essence, my soul. No matter what my children do or need, I am committed to this calling.

Silently, I lay my cheek against my daughter’s hair and begin to pray a mother’s blessing upon her and upon her daughter—and upon my mother’s daughter. I pray that my daughter will know her sacrifice was an act of love, that rather than divide her baby in pieces with shame and blame as I was divided, she had given her up to be loved. I pray she will know we have made progress over these generations. I pray silently that soon, she will return to the peace that makes no sense, the peace that passeth understanding, the only peace that works in these kind of circumstances, the peace of Christ’s Atonement. My own tears begin to form and fall into her hair, an adequate anointing.
WORKS CITED


The Bible.

The Book of Mormon.


The Doctrine & Covenants.


The Pearl of Great Price.


WORKS READ


Lane, Barry. *Writing as a Road to Self-Discovery*. Cincinnati. Writers Digest, 1993.


A Voice from the Fire:
the Authority of Experience

Colleen Campion Bernhard
Department of English
M.A. Degree, December 1996

ABSTRACT

Over all, this thesis was written to be a “ramble” of its own around and through three issues that are central to the writing of the personal essay—voice, authority, and experience—and central to the emergence of this author’s own sense of “self.”

Drawing upon years of voluminous journals, this collection of six personal essays demonstrates what the scholarly introduction proposes: that the personal essay is both a valid genre and a magnificent bridge from informal life-writing to genuine literary accomplishment. Drawing on Phillip Lopate’s differentiation of “memoiristic” essays from the more classic autobiographical form, this collection includes three of each “persuasion.” First, there are three autobiographical pieces which combine narrative with exposition. In the second section of the thesis there are three memoiristic essays written entirely in a story-like style, employing such devices as dialog, character development, and detailed description.

COMMITTEE APPROVAL:  

Louise Plummer, Committee Chair

George Eugene England, Committee Member

Susan Howe, Committee Member

Jesse S. Crisler, Graduate Coordinator