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Dancing with Heretics: Essays on Orthodoxy, Questioning and Faith

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Dancing with Heretics: Essays on Orthodoxy, Questioning and Faith

By

Darren M. Edwards

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

MASTERS OF SCIENCE

in

English

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ABSTRACT

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by

Darren M. Edwards, Master of Science

Utah State University, 2010

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Department: English

While much has been written about the conflicts, supposed or actual, between logic and faith, science and religion, few accounts of the personal turmoil these conflicts can cause exist. Likewise, many of these nonfiction accounts are written from a distinctly polarized place leaning either to science or faith.

In this thesis, I mix research and history with memoir and a sense of poetry to explore my personal experience with this conflict. At its outset, I hoped for this project to capture my struggle as an orthodox member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) in dealing with the questions my own sense of logic provided that institution. This goal was achieved in part. However, by the end of the project I had also captured a narrative exploration of my experience leaving the LDS Church and learning, instead of trusting the authority provided by a structure of orthodoxy, to feel comfortable trusting my own sense of reason.

The first chapter captures my initial struggle with acknowledging questions within a religious structure. This is accomplished, in part, by merging the personal narrative with a researched account of French priest and paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. I show both his struggle with questions and faith, and my desire to lean on his example as someone who acknowledged question without leaving his faith—in Chardin’s case the Catholic Church. The second chapter, again following this pattern of mixing research with memoir, explores the feelings of exile I had during the time while I was still an orthodox member of the LDS church. This personal narrative is woven into several historical and literary accounts of exile. In the third chapter, I struggle with the question of what to do with the spiritual experiences I had during my time in the LDS Church after having separated myself from that institution. The short fourth chapter takes a strictly narrative line as I address my spiritual and mental outlook upon the completion of this project.

(73 pages)

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This project wouldn't have been possible without the thoughts, lives, and writings of historic figures like Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Flannery O'Connor, and Rene Descartes.

Lastly, I would like to extend love and thanks to my family. The consistency of their love and support sustains me in every endeavor I undertake.

Darren M. Edwards

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INTRODUCTION

In a freshman composition course I read and fell in love with Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. In it, Dillard writes of how she lives at the edge of Tinker Creek, where she observes the world around her and works her way through the questions those observations present. My composition instructor classified this nonfiction narrative as a "theodicy"—a book that tried to explain the nature of God and/or the universe. I am not writing a theodicy here; rather, this work is an examination of the ways in which people, myself as the prime example, squirm around under the weight of God and/or the universe. While Dillard observed the way the world around her interacted with itself in an attempt to understand the bigger picture, I have looked inward at how and why I function the way I do as I try and come to grips with my place in the world or universe under God's eye.

Through *Dancing with Heretics*, I explore not only the role of questions and questioning in my personal faith (which I define as belief in the absence of knowledge) and my relation to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the religion I was raised in) but what the relations among questioning, orthodoxies, and faith can tell us about the broader world.

In Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, a young monk named Alyosha is nurtured through spiritual trials, guided and directed through questions by his mentor, the Elder Zosima. Even after his death the Elder serves as a source of comfort, inspiration and direction. Growing up I would have given anything for my own Elder Zosima. I longed for a spiritual mentor who could help me navigate the corridors between mind and spirit: a guide to help me traverse the trail that leads along the gulf between orthodoxy and heresy. What I would find years later, in between the stacks of Utah State

University's Merrill-Cazier Library, was the companionship of thinkers from other faiths, people such as Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Flannery O'Connor, and Rene Descartes, people whose explorations of their faith through art and science was often seen as heresy by more orthodox members of their religions.

The first historical heretic I discovered, and probably the one I connected with the strongest, was Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Chardin became a Jesuit priest at the age of 19, the same age I became a missionary for the LDS Church. Chardin was derided, silenced, and exiled by the Catholic Church because he could not keep in stride with what they thought his scientific work as a Jesuit should be. He believed fiercely in his church as well as in his right to disagree with and question that institution. Chardin's questions were not signs of simple rebellion but rather evidence of a great mind trying to reconcile multiple realities. He spent his life trying to bring balance to the scales of science and religion. He was able to see beyond the apparent conflict of evolution and original sin. Off in the distance he could see an answer, just out of his reach, as to how the two could agree, so he dove into the conflict head first knowing that if he was to get his answer he must first understand the questions.

Throughout his life, Chardin never left the Catholic Church or abandoned those personal beliefs that were at odds with the Church. He hung around in what the Nobel-Prize winning chemist (and notable poet) Roald Hoffman calls the "tense middle." Chardin's life was spent digging at questions while bent under pressure from the orthodoxies of his faith. Chardin's life and thoughts, particularly his thoughts while in exile, help me to explore the darkest corners of the struggle between orthodoxy and

individuality.

While Chardin's life was an example of a great mind functioning in exile, Flannery O'Connor's writings explored, through fictional characters, how exile can help lead to salvation. The trend in Catholic literature during the 1950s and 60s was to write didactic, apologetic stories defending or affirming the position of the Church. Flannery O'Connor saw these stories as sentimental and off-putting. She wrote in an essay, "[Some] Catholics...declare that whatever the Catholic writer can see, there are certain things that he should not see, straight or otherwise. These are the Catholics who are victims of the parochial aesthetic and the cultural insularity." Despite harsh reviews from the general body of Catholics concerning much of her work, O'Connor kept reaching beyond the sentimental into the grotesque. She later wrote of what she saw as the Catholic predilection for sentimentality which was so at odds with the grotesque:

We lost our innocence in the Fall, and our return to it is through the Redemption which was brought about by Christ's death and by our slow participation in it. Sentimentality is a skipping of this process in its concrete reality and an early arrival at a mock state of innocence, which strongly suggests its opposite.

For O'Connor, the sentimentality that helped other Catholics feel closer to God and each other was off-putting, it ignored reality, disrespecting the dirty details of life. By contrast, the ways she chose to express and explore her faith, digging into and exploring those details, seemed heretical to them.

Much of O'Connor's fiction is about the transformation of the protagonist to some higher state of being, often after some form of isolation for the protagonist, some journey

into the “desert” where this greater sense of self understanding can take place. It was through O’Connor’s fiction that I first realized exile could be more than a punishment, that it could, in fact, serve as a place of great productivity.

Both Chardin and O’Connor are examples of individuals who put as much weight behind their own logic, what their minds could come up with, as they did what those in authority told them. This is a trend that can, with little effort, be traced back to Rene Descartes. Perhaps few people have had a greater impact on the world, at least the way we think about ourselves and our world, than French philosopher Rene Descartes. Despite the fact that Descartes never left or directly challenged the Catholic Church many of his ideas did. Of all his ideas, it can be argued the most controversial were those that extolled the ability of the individual to think for themselves, that a persons “good sense” could lead to new knowledge. People were no longer dependant on authority for knowledge; they didn’t have to beg for scraps at the feet of the church and the state. This idea, the individuals mind conflicting with established orthodoxies, is central to every chapter of *Dancing with Heretics*. Descartes’ ideas became kindling for the Enlightenment, burning a fire of Cartesian thinking in great minds all over Europe. Here, at the corner of Cartesian thinking and Catholic power, is where we first see a struggle between science and religion. Both, Descartes’ thoughts and the train of events those thoughts caused, help guide me through the sticky corridor that runs between logic and faith.

I remember a poem I read as a child by Shel Silverstein; it was about a girl who wanted to eat a whale and did so one bite at a time. That poem is an accurate representation of both the scope and structure of this work. In tackling ideas as complicated and heavy as faith and heresy, orthodoxies and rebellion, questioning and community, I intend to take small bites. This work consists of four stand-alone essays all revolving around different aspects of a central concept: the interplay between the process of questioning, the standards and restrictions set up by orthodoxies, and the way an individual's faith can stand in contrast to the broader spiritual community. These chapters/essays are ordered in a way that allows for a logical and deepening progression through that central concept.

To set up the concept of questioning, the opening chapter introduces both my struggle with questioning aspects of the religion I was raised in and the role questioning had in Chardin's life as a scientist and a priest. I discuss the difference between apologetics and acknowledging unanswered questions. The arc of this chapter/essay paints a broad picture of my transition in acknowledging the questions surrounding my personal faith and the LDS Church.

The second chapter/essay deals with the struggle between reason and faith. I draw on research from the canon of literature already dedicated to the conflict between science and religion and my own personal experiences. Here, I explore what would happen if, much like a scientist who presses boldly forward knowing when they make a mistake or wrong turn, they can always go back to the last solid spot of reasoning and start again, the individual did the same thing in attempting to understand personal spiritual experiences,

always coming back to the solid ground--not of what they've interpreted these experiences to mean--but simply that these experiences happened.

In chapter three, I recount the lives of two of my ancestors who struggled with heresy and were, as a result, exiled. I also look over my own feelings of exile during my time in the LDS Church. In laying these stories over each other, as well as bits of Chardin's letters written while in exile and O'Connors tendency to place her characters in exile, I attempt to find the fruit that can come from time in exile, as well as explore whether exile is a physical state of being or a state of mind.

In the closing chapter, I have tried to pin down where this process of questioning and this struggle between religious community and spiritual belief has left me. I take stock of where I was, where I am and what the outlook for the future might be.

*

The source material I used for this project can easily be divided into two categories: primary and secondary. Where the secondary sources add a feeling of breadth and understanding to the characters and ideas I explore in *Dancing with Heretics*, the primary sources bring a depth and clarity this project would have otherwise lacked.

While my primary sources include things as traditional as reading the original publications of Chardin, Descartes, and O'Connor, they also spread to things as different as a place visit to an eighty-three-year-old weeping American elm or reading through the a collection of letters Chardin wrote to his close friend Lucile Swan.

Often the best research happens of the metaphorical level. While my visit to the weeping American elm that spreads behind the Provo city courthouse had no direct

connection to the topic at hand--the struggle between logic and faith in chapter two--it became a representation of religious/spiritual experiences discussed in that chapter and worked as bridge connecting ideas that I wouldn't have been able to connect without such a strong metaphor to carry some of the weight.

I'd love to have done more of this type of research, though funds and time prevented this. I'd love to have visited the peking man in China, or walked among the battlefields where Chardin worked as a soldier priest. This work however, was left to be done in the library. While I read many biographies and critical analyses of Chardin's life, the source that was the greatest benefit was *The Letters of Teilhard de Chardin & Lucile Swan*, edited by Thomas M. King, S.J., and Mary Wood Gilbert. These letters provide firsthand insight to significant moments in Chardin's life, for example his times at war and during exile. These letters contain his thoughts expressed candidly to, perhaps, his closest confidant.

While considering O'Connor her fiction may have been my primary focus, still, it was some of her first person essays that gave me the greatest insight into her character and the reasoning behind her fiction. In *Mystery and Manners*, we find a collection of essays written by Flannery O'Connor throughout her life. Many of these essays, such as "Novelist and Believer" and "The Church and the Fiction Writer," explore O'Connor's thoughts about her differences from the Catholic Church. They discuss why she feels writing the way she does is important, and presents rebuttals to many of the arguments made against this style of writing. By using her life and Chardin's to connect to and contrast from my own experiences, I have tried to "cast out from that lonely island of the

singular first person experience as a method of engaging the larger world,” as writer Brandon Schrand has said.

While it contains many aspects of a secondary source, the anthropological and sociological work of Richley Crapo feels more like a primary source. In his articles are his first hand observations and experiment results. These articles were a source of invaluable help in this project providing insights into the culture and organizational structure of the LDS Church. The primary work of Crapo’s I used and referenced was his article “Grass-Roots Deviance from Official Doctrine: A Study of Latter-Day Saint (Mormon) Folk-Beliefs,” published in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*.

Looking into secondary sources, I wanted to get a feel for the academic discussion that was already taking place on some of the subjects I was about to approach. I looked at examples of books that tried to navigate the difficult terrain of writing about faith. In *Fire in the Mind*, George Johnson writes about the history of faith and science in the New Mexico region, exploring more particularly the ways that some aspects of science are leaning more and more toward faith. In Russell Shorto’s *Descartes’ Bones* we see an investigation into the conflict between faith and reason through the history of the French philosopher Rene Descartes’ skull and bones.

Stephen Jay Gould approaches the issue of an academic compromise between science and religion from a more isolating angle. In his book, *Rock of Ages*, he argues that there is no real conflict between science and religion because the two, as fields of study, have nothing to do with each other and should be treated as such. It is in this book that he coins his term NOMA, or non-overlapping magisterial, suggesting that, while they

work just fine independently, there is no real room for science and religion to overlap.

Bridging Science and Religion is a collection of essays written by varying authors, each experts in their respective fields, that try to do exactly what Gould said science and religion couldn't, improve each other by cross-application. Here I was able to find a variety of voices coming together trying to tackle this monstrous topic.

Richard Dawkins *The God Delusion* functions primarily as an atheistic manifesto. It would be difficult to find a book leaning harder to the side of scientific bias against religion than Dawkins does.

Taking a far more balanced approach to the issue is Chet Raymo's *Skeptics and True Believers*. Here is a book that carries some sense of deliberation in its approach to the issues of science and religion. That said, Raymo makes it clear to his reader up front, that he does not believe in a god in the traditional sense. So, while *Skeptics and True Believers* provides a more moderate approach to some of the issues surrounding science and religion, some sense of bias still creeps in at times.

Secondary sources also came in handy as I turned to a bit of my family history to explore some of the notable heretics in my genealogy. Christopher M. Jedry's *The World of John Cleaveland*, was a source of vast historical information about a period of time when many of my ancestors were caught in the struggles surrounding the Great Awakening.

While Gerald N. Callahan's *Faith, Madness and Spontaneous Human Combustion* weaves between scientific/academic discussion on aspects of faith and moments of memoir, glimpses into Callahan's life—thinking he's seeing his dead wife everywhere—

these are moments from the life of a self proclaimed non-believer. This perhaps is where *Dancing with Heretics* differs the most from the literature that's out there. It is—in part—an honest, open, personal account of the conflicts that can arise as one looks into faith with wide eyes, acknowledging the discrepancies and gaps that can occur in one's religious/spiritual life.

While a project of this size cannot comprehensively cover issues of this magnitude, my hope is that by exploring these issues, as a child left in the wild might poke around the landscape with a stick, some sense of balance can be gained for myself and the reader in relation to these ideas and our positions relative to them.

My plan here is not to teach the method that everyone must follow in order to guide their reason, but merely to explain how I have tried to guide my own.

— Rene Descartes

Reader, thou hast here an honest book...I desire therein to be viewed as I appear...for it is myself I paint.

— Michel de Montaigne

Hiding in the Shadow of Holiness

I want to go into the woods with Joseph,
climb the mountain with Moses,
dance a wild dance around the burning bush
and sing this world's praise until my throat is
raw,
sore from screaming into the flames
streaked with red lines
red lines that run like the blood of saints
who took their fear
their concern for self and put it
in their back pocket,
strapped faith to their chest
and took a stone to the head—

red lines that run like the blood of sinners
the ones who kept trying
to find God,
but kept winding up wrapped in the legs
of a stranger
begging for closeness
begging for connection to
something more alive than themselves.
I want to see the hand of God

and then take a step closer

let my skin burn off and fall
in ashen flakes
like the pages of some sacred parchment
lost to the world.

I want to hide in the shadow of holiness,
just to see the style of its stride when it doesn't
know I'm there.

I want to crawl next to Job,
pick my skin to blisters
grab a fist full of gravel,
one pebble for every question
I have to ask—not because I don't believe,
but because I do,
and rub my eyes until I go blind.

No, until I can see.
Until the gravel has fused into new eyes,
retinas reflecting every angle of understanding.

I want to look beyond the edge
of doubt, through the foothills where every crack
of every rock is bulging with the details of this life
and where every detail, glorious or wretched
can be seen for what it is—
a piece of us all—

I want to tear my knuckles
pushing into the cracks
and past the bedrock
to take in the glowing river of
knowledge God has hidden there,

and then I will weep.

I will fold my arms with the reverence
of a child surrounded by the blaze
of a hundred prayer candles,
bow my head in honor of God
and this crazy, painfully
unholy, but beautifully sanctified show we're all playing in—
and I will weep for you
and for me
and for the saints
and the sinners
the martyrs
and the liars
for the clutching hands
of partners that will soon
be parted,
for the adulterers
and the twenty-nine year old virgins
praying for strength
and for all of us who play
each of these roles eventually.

Darren M. Edwards

CHAPTER I

Nothing is profane for one who knows how to see.

-Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

It must have been pleasant growing up in the Auvergne, a province nestled in a part of France older than anything Anglo-Saxon in America. Just the view from the window of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's youth—a fountain tucked away in the corner of a meticulously groomed yard that was itself tucked away in the corner of a valley, green overlapping green to the horizon—would have filled him with a sense of security. His childhood home was warm and loving; his mother taught the children from the Bible when they weren't playing in the yard or the layers of green fields and forests beyond.

Somewhere in all that green were volcanic fields, tan, deep red and black potholed hills where Chardin first discovered a love for rocks, dirt and earth, the stuff of science. Much of his free time was spent climbing on hands and knees over the rough rock. He couldn't have known then, chasing adventure over glowing hills set on fire by an Auvergne sunset, that this love for rocks—the backbone to our tangible world—would lead him to fossils and paleontology, then evolution and exile.

Throughout most of his life, Chardin appeared to struggle finding balance between the love for God he'd been given by his mother and the love of science he discovered playing on the land. This love of God and Church was strong enough that Chardin took vows as a Jesuit Priest at the age of nineteen.

Around 1901 Chardin, and many Jesuit priests, fled France in hopes of escaping the government's anti-clerical movement. He wound up on the island of Jersey where

science, once again, found root in him. He spent much of his time studying fossils, and later published a paper on the fossil record of the Jersey shore. Chardin was beginning to believe everything in the universe was connected. Something about touching pieces of the past, letting the rough edges of some relic rub in his hand, helped him see that pantheistic connection welding the ages of the world together. For him, there were volumes waiting to be read in the cracks and creases of a horn coral or crinoid. Chardin developed a good bead on how things connected even when their presence was brought to his attention by their apparent disagreement.

When he learned of Darwin and evolution, he was understandably thrilled. What could be more exciting than a scientific idea that every creature on the planet was somehow connected? But this new idea was at odds with the Catholic understanding of original sin, mankind's origins springing from dust, a rib and some forbidden fruit. Still, somewhere in the clash and clutter of apparent conflict, Chardin could see room for both Darwin and Adam and Eve in the garden.

*

I have always loved the design of pews; they're simple and functional. I like the look of a chapel filled with rows of pews, lined up like soldiers awaiting inspection from God. I remember lying under them as a child. Playing with a He-man action figure at my mother's feet, I never heard a word of Sunday meetings. I believed without asking questions.

But as I grew up I started to notice things, concepts that appeared to disagree, holes in church history, ideas I couldn't align. I didn't get why a loving God would deny

whole portions of his children blessings. I didn't understand why, really why, in biblical times the gentiles couldn't hear the gospel, or why, in the early days of Mormonism, every worthy man couldn't hold the priesthood. And where, if gender is an essential part of existence in this world, the one before and the one to come, do hermaphrodites fit in?

Over the years, my brother Curry pointed out more questions about my faith than anyone else. He left the church in his early teens, and I didn't see much of him after that. We didn't get along. I can even remember referring to him as "my parents other child" rather than my brother. Much of what he did appeared wicked: smoking, drinking and partying. It was my senior year of high school when he moved home from college. At first I threatened to move out, go live with my Grandma Fish, but things change. There was a redwood deck with a hot tub in our backyard. I liked to sit there in the evenings. The yard was wrapped by an irrigation ditch and tall arching birches that framed the stars at night. It was my place to relax and think, so I was angry the first night Curry came out to the hot tub, though I didn't show it. A lot of our conversations in that hot tub focused on his problems with the Church, or stories of wild nights at college, but in the spaces between, the spaces where we talked about society and politics, music and pop culture, I began to know my brother, and the easy label "wicked" didn't fit the person I was growing to understand. Despite our fundamental disagreements, there was some common ground: We disliked politicians who could see things only in extremes from either side and we both felt laws should be made to protect our rights, not tell us what is right and wrong. A lot of the time we were seeing the same thing from opposite sides of the fence.

I was beginning to see Curry as complicated, a shade of grey in a culture that often paints things in black and white.

Despite lingering questions, I believed my religion and at nineteen was set apart as a full time missionary for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. During the two years I spent bouncing around Pennsylvania, knocking on doors in my white shirt and little black nametag, I had the privilege of hearing the beliefs and doubts of hundreds of people about life and God. Some shared them in anger, others in confidence. It amazed me how people could open up to a couple of kids. I don't know what it was, but people wanted to believe in us even if they didn't believe us.

In his book *Faith, Madness, and Spontaneous Human Combustion*, Gerald N. Callahan says, "Every foundation ever erected to support human beliefs and human behavior is riddled with rotten concrete—spots where logic is conveniently moldy, gaps that we could never find glue to fill, but gaps that we came to overlook because we couldn't resist the final construction. Into those gaps, we squeeze the mortar of our lies." Throughout my life, I'd seen people cramming questions with answers that didn't fit, and despite the fact I felt something was wrong with that practice, I started to follow suit.

Flipping through the wrinkled and worn pages of the New Testament I used on my mission, I see yellow and pink highlighter everywhere with red notes filling the margins. I covered those pages with scripture chains linking ideas, trying to prove belief. I used them to jump from one verse to another while arguing everything from theosis to biblical polygamy, but I was taking many of the scriptures out of context, twisting meanings to suit my needs, shoving bubble gum in a hole in the wall. Apologetics are a

quick fix, a magician's sleight of hand; they assume that the complicated sections of faith, the questions, have no value. What I didn't realize was that it's the cracks, the parts of doctrine and dogma that seem cluttered, confusing and chaotic that can matter most; the questions are of supreme importance. But questions don't often sit well within a structure built on orthodoxy.

It's like when I was a child playing at the kitchen sink; I'd fill a cup with water, and then sprinkle in some pepper. The brown and black flecks sat on the surface unagitated, at peace, doctrines laid out creating what appeared to be a surface firm enough to walk across. I could stir the cup with a spoon or my finger but the flecks would always settle back down, regaining a placid nature. I thought this was great fun, toying with the flecks, because I knew what came next. Raising the bottle of dish soap, I played the role of mad scientist slowly squeezing one drop into the cup. What followed wasn't chaos, but what seemed like an orderly (even if quick) retreat to safe quarters—brown and black flecks shooting away from the drop of blue to the stability of the cup's sides. Often when I'd play these games, I'd picture the dish soap as an invading army, the Vikings or pirates come to raid the little pepper community. It would mirror how I later felt, when questions ravaged my understanding of the world, cannons blasted at the foundation of the reality I grew up knowing, a reality where the Church was the answer to everything, was never wrong, and had clearly drawn the lines of good and evil.

A little over a year before I left to serve my mission, I found myself on a fishing trip with my dad. It was somewhere in the early morning hours. I was balancing my way along a rocky shoreline, stepping from one river worn stone to the next. My dad stood

ankle deep in an Alaskan stream tracing poetry in the air. Soft pink and deep orange filled the sky the way they do at night in a land where time seems to have lost its feel for itself. His line floated in horizontal arches over the water. How could any fish not be stunned into submission? It's the only time in my life I've thought of my father as an artist. Watching him I could see why he made the trip from Utah to Alaska every year; it was about more than the fishing. I'm not sure he was even thinking about fish at the time. He seemed more like a dancer moving to a song that I, with my standard cast and reel, was unworthy to hear. Years later I'd find this same feeling reading Chardin's prose. Recreating his life in my mind, I was entranced as I discovered the passion and determination he had in navigating the borders between questioning and orthodoxy, his elegance in dancing with heresy.

A few days into the trip, our guide Tom, a tall country-looking veteran with big glasses and even bigger ears, dropped us off at the Talkeetna River. We put on our fishing waders, water proof jackets and multi-pocketed vests. The water was running fast and a little higher than we expected, but we'd come for king salmon and this was supposed to be the best spot. So, we trudged a dozen feet out into the freezing water and started casting. The water moved hard, gripping at my legs. I was in it up to my thighs and had to try and stand at an acute angle to the flow just to keep vertical. It was strange, fighting the current. What my mind told me and the reality were two vastly different things. I was standing straight up, I could see the opposite bank, the green brush hanging over into the water, I could see it was all level, but it felt like I was leaning hard to the left and the world was at a tilt. Not unlike the first time I wondered why my Mormon

spiritual experiences were more valid than the Catholic or Buddhists' down the street. I was too focused on balance to do much fishing, but my dad caught a good three-foot king.

The next day we went to Homer to go deep-sea fishing. There was a beautiful coastline that wrapped around to meet the sky and the morning silhouette of the fisherman's Wharf memorial: a gazebo-shaped structure with a long spire stretching out from its center, the memorial was dedicated to those fishermen who lost their lives after sending off from Homer.

I stared at the wake most of the way out from shore; the boat's agitated trail was like a stampede of tiny hand blown glass figurines: reptiles, horses and birds all tumbling over each other in a bath of foam, little bursts of translucent water off set by a backdrop of dark blue and green ocean, a breathtaking display of birth, existence and death. My dad told me to focus on the coastline if I didn't want to get seasick, but I couldn't help staring at the glass in-between the foam.

By the time we stopped, somewhere between Alaska and Russia, there was no coast to see. We sat in special chairs with a built-in spot, like a cup holder, to support the massive deep-sea fishing poles. We fished for halibut and caught some. Strange things, diamonds as big as my seventeen-year-old body, all white on one side with no eyes. The other side was dark grey, the color of the ocean floor, with two eyes. The fish were slimy, jostling fiction—some Seussian creation crept from the page of a children's story. By the time I caught my first, I was already seasick. There was no up or down; up and down require a firm base to exist, and everything was motion. I leaned over the side of the boat

vomiting lumpy pink into glassy blue. When I finished, my dad told me to stand up and get my picture taken with one of the fish. Looking at the picture of that halibut and me, a decade later, it doesn't look any more real now than back then. I could have sat down and interviewed the damn thing, and it probably still wouldn't have seemed real. It would have been a more peaceful trip had I taken my dad's advice, focused on the stability of the shoreline. There would have been no battle to find a sense of equilibrium ending with me hunched over a railing staring at the ocean. But what happens when the shoreline stops providing any sense of stability, like my experience at the Talkeetna? What happens when what you've always known as certain doesn't seem to agree with some new reality?

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“Never again, please God, may we be able to say of religion that its influence has made men more indolent, more unenterprising, less human; never again may its attitude lie open to the damning suspicion that it seeks to replace science by theology, effort by prayer, battle by resignation, and that its dogmas may well debase the value of the world by limiting in advance the scope of inquiry and the sphere of energy. Never again, I pray, may anyone dare to complain of Rome that it is afraid of anything that moves and thinks.”

Chardin wrote this bold prayer in 1916, ten years before the Catholic Church barred him from publishing anything but strictly scientific papers, banned him from teaching at the Jesuit schools, and exiled him to China for exploring cordial relations between evolutionary thought and the theology of original sin, man's creation in the garden. Chardin wrote to a friend that the restrictions placed upon him and his work

caused him to suffocate “absolutely, physically.” Many of his academic friends pleaded with him asking why he wouldn’t pull himself out from under the church’s oppression and leave the Jesuits. And if it was causing him such pain, why did he stay? The answer may lie in another line from one of Chardin’s letters where he says leaving the Jesuits would mean, “the killing of everything [he] want[ed] to liberate, not destroy.” This is the song Chardin danced to, this refusal to abandon the Catholic Church as a whole—despite its rejection of those ideas that he had discovered were essential to who he was. Somehow, he was able to make some sense of rhythm out of the cacophony created through the clashing of different realities, and he never quit, never left the Catholic Church. I want to take the life this man lived, the way he endured the conflicts presented by a torn sense of reality, not just well, but elegantly, beautifully, and use it as a blue print. I want to wrap up in his ideas and let them carry me down the cracks in my world.

Eleven years prior, he had been called to the Great War. He volunteered to work as a stretcher-bearer, carrying the wounded off the front lines, and was assigned to the 13th infantry. He recorded in his letters to Marguerite Teilhard-Chambon that “for us soldier-priests war was a baptism into reality.” Much of his time was spent in the trenches where “the 390 and 420mm. [came] over with a noise like a tram.” During enemy onslaughts, he noted, “the earth itself presents such a force of inertia to a man’s attempts to move...that it often happens (how often too!) that he simply falls down, exhausted, with tears in his eyes.” I’ve been there, not on a battlefield but in my mind, questions like mortars assaulting established beliefs, the structures of orthodoxy firing back into the dark.

Through these difficulties Chardin remained focused on his faith. His letters to Marguerite are filled with comments on Mass and advice for her in spiritual matters, “Keep right on, relying on our Lord alone” he wrote in the closing of one letter from Clermont in 1914. I wonder, if kneeling in the loose mud of those trench floors, one hand holding his helmet to his head the other entangled in his rosary, grenades popping all around as he prayed over a wounded or dead soldier, if he thought it possible that worse days lay ahead. It was during this time, despite the torn faces and mangled bodies of the front line, the “whistle of shells and crack of bullets,” that Pierre Teilhard de Chardin saw God in mystic vision, in that pantheistic way he had come to believe in him, glowing—merging with all matter. One of these visions took place as Chardin looked into the eyes of a dying soldier, perhaps a reflection of divine light, or perhaps the holy heart flickering between the concrete and spirit, the temporal and eternal, like waves catching sunlight as they roll. Maybe these visions were just his mind’s way of coping with the war, a subconscious trick to pull himself through hell. But I can’t believe this; I believe in the man and his convictions, and I believe that it takes more courage to live with your convictions in circumstances like his than it would to die for them. I believe on that battlefield Chardin saw God.

*

Six years after returning from my mission I find myself teaching English at UtahStateUniversity. It’s a nice day. I’m walking from the student center to my office in the Ray B. West building. Crowds often gather outside the student center for one thing or another: blood drive, job fair, student body bonding activities. Today, the crowd seems

too serious to be bonding; two men are in the center with a whiteboard that reads, “The God of the Bible V.S. the Mormon God.” Sounds like a good ticket. A sellout here in Utah. The younger of the two men is arguing with what is obviously a recently returned Mormon missionary. They hurl scripture passages at each other like duelers throwing knives, and for a second I feel an old urge and want to jump in the fray, but as I continue to listen each counter argument grows more and more out of context. Neither man is reaching for understanding; you can’t when you’re that angry. I wonder what they’re trying to accomplish, but I should know, because that used to be me: filling the cracks with whatever was handy, looking for answers without thinking about the question. They aren’t really looking, neither was I. The answer being right didn’t matter as much as it being present. Their questions aren’t meant to explore but to cause waves in the other man’s faith, their answers a speedy yet orderly retreat to safe waters.

And this is my problem, the dilemma of my orthodoxy: I believe in the beauty of the questions, even as they pull my world apart. I cannot turn from them and head for the safe waters of tradition, some deeply real part of myself, something that lives right under my heart next to my nervous system, some organ that cannot be found in a text of human biology will not let me.

Annie Dillard once said, “Any and all claims of revelation cannot be so far fetched as a single giraffe.” I’d add, or a halibut. I may never see God, or even find an answer, but it’s still worth asking the questions. There is something to be learned from the process of asking questions, even ones apparently without answers, or at least where the answers don’t come easily. I can’t be afraid of the questions, because there is beauty

in the complications—there is life in those clear shining moments between the foam. Resting between acknowledgement of the ignorance inherent in humanity and the vision of something no more real than a halibut lies breath and existence and beauty, draped in the unknown.

Chardin believed in evolution. I believe in questions. Reaching out from some lonely island, a Jersey shore in my mind, I grab onto Chardin, hold tight. I want to use his life, his example, not just his ideas but the passion with which he stood by them, as a pool of safe waters. I will cling to his words in the middle of this chaos, floating below rising waves at the creation of some new world.

CHAPTER II

I have the obscure feeling that something is moving or growing inside of me: as if...the true “myself” was escaping a little more, still, from a world of conventions...But what to make of that?—How to propagate, in my condition, the sparkle I believe to feel in myself?—I don’t see. But I wait, and I watch.—My dearest faith is that something Loving is the deepest essence of the growing universe.

—Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

Ancestry

There must have been a bang, or perhaps more heaviness, more of a thud, as the door to Rector Clap’s office swung closed. It was late into November and, even had the topic of conversation not been so serious, there would have been a chill echoing off the walls. John Cleaveland and his younger brother Ebenezer didn’t know that Clap, head of Yale beginning in 1740, had already written an order for their expulsion; they wouldn’t know that until later in the evening. They couldn’t, just yet, see the intentions behind Clap’s eyes, or the deceit in his words.

John’s early life, according to historian Christopher M. Jedry’s *The World of John Cleaveland*, was filled with hard work on the family farm. However, when he wasn’t callusing his hands he took to studying, “with great engagedness and constancy.” His mother, Abigail Paine Cleaveland, whom John described as, “a woman of experimental piety,” taught him how to read and enforced in him the importance of having an “interest in Jesus Christ in order to be safe and happy.” The entire Cleaveland family was deeply

spiritual (joining the Canterbury Church in 1740), as was much of the region at the time, the Great Awakening just getting into full swing. A number of John's uncles went around preaching, exhorting and fervently praying with congregations in the winds of the Awakening, though they weren't—as the state required—licensed ministers (an offence for which his uncle Elisha Paine was imprisoned).

This was the scene of the Great Awakening: Preacher rapt in emotion, energetic sermons with shaking hands and elevated voices, audiences mirroring with their own cries and fits. “New Light” preachers were springing up spiritual revivals on every corner. As the average man and woman was overcome with religious momentum, the established colonial religious hierarchy was overcome with concern for their authority and the sanctity and orthodoxy of the churches and religious society they were building.

John appeared to have been particularly touched by a prophecy his grandfather, Elisha Paine, Sr., gave from his deathbed, where he claimed, “God would speedily do marvelous things of a gracious nature.” Believing the prophecy to have come to fruition John wrote of it, “where about forty persons [gave] satisfactory evidence of a work of grace being wrought upon their souls.” I imagine a general fondness for his grandfather and the awe at feeling he'd witnessed something of a spiritually spectacular nature worked in John, stoking the fires of conversion his family's involvement in the Awakening had set in his chest. This all led John to desire a more formal education and to use that education to join the ministry.

Of course, surrounded by family, it can be hard to see the lines of discrepancy that rise between the world you were raised in, and that world surrounding it. So, in 1741,

stepping, for the first time, onto the town green in front of the Yale House and chapel, the two buildings that made up the whole of Yale in those years, John was really about to walk into the conflict that would divide him over the next four years, one side craving the learning and preparation necessary for a traditional ministry, the other longing for that spiritual excitement and passion provided by his family's background in the rise of the Great Awakening. But it was more than this, the side of John that wanted formal education only wanted it for the purpose of becoming a minister. Yet, much of what was being taught in the revivals of the Awakening (which would soon storm Yale) fought against formal education of ministers, not only that education, degrees and licenses weren't necessary to preach, but that they didn't—in fact—give one any authority to preach.

I can't say I've ever felt compelled by some unseen force to shake or shout or speak in tongues, but I have felt the world shrink beneath my feet until I swear I could have wrapped my arms around it. I remember riding my bike back to my missionary apartment, an enormous moon glowing overhead, the galaxy pressing around me—not an uncomfortable pressure but rather a freeing one—like squeezing paint from a tube. As it pressed in on the space around me, on that bushel-sized Earth below me, it seemed to draw me up and out into the space of all that man once deemed the heavens, as though I could feel, in some small way, the shift and pull of worlds and stars. Is this what John felt sitting in a revival tent with his family?

One Little Coal

I remember going to a youth activity held by my church. Unlike the evangelical upbringing of my distant relative John, I was raised as a Latter-day Saint. Growing up Mormon there is always a gathering of one kind or another, a chance for the saints to unite. Sitting in the flickering glow of a camp fire, I listened to one of the youth leaders explain how each of us are like the coals of a fire. “When each of the coals is together with the group they glow warm and keep the fire going.” He picked up a stick and nudged a coal out of the fire into the brisk night air and continued, “If a coal gets separated from the group it loses its warmth.” I watched as the once-vibrant ember slowly died, its shades of red and orange fizzling to a stale black. The message was clear: there is strength in unity and death in isolation.

Grotesque

It’s scary standing at the edge of one’s faith, looking at things others won’t and don’t think you should. Flannery O’Connor wrote from this place for most of her life. The trend in Catholic literature during the 1950s and 60s was to write didactic, apologetic stories defending or affirming the position of the Church. O’Connor saw these stories as sentimental and off-putting. “[Some] Catholics...declare that whatever the Catholic writer can see, there are certain things that he should not see, straight or otherwise,” she once wrote. O’Connor received harsh reviews from parts of the general body of Catholics on much of her work. Many reviews called her work disturbing, or labeled them horror stories. This tradition is continued by some contemporary critics, as one has written of the style O’Connor started, “Anyone else wondering why we need to suffer through two

hundred pages of shock reading to get to a not-so-bright point about morality?” Still, O’Connor continued to reach beyond the sentimental into the grotesque, exploring the divine through the raw and real details of what it can be like below the heavens.

From Exile

Below the row of covered life boats that hung around *du Porthos*, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin sat enjoying the calm waters left behind by an expiring typhoon. However, this was not a pleasure trip for the French priest/paleontologist. A day out from Hong Kong, Chardin wrote a letter to a dear friend, a friend who knew of his intellectual conflicts with the Catholic Church, who understood that his exile to China was more than physical separation. This was a separation of himself, a priest torn from the body of believers, his right to teach at Jesuit universities revoked. These things created a gap in the center of his being and forced him into hard introspection. What does a strident, faithful man do when he finds himself outside the temple walls? Chardin’s beliefs about things like evolution and “the...divide between the past and the future world” conflicted with official stances taken by the Catholic Church. In the closing line of his letter to that friend, Lucile Swan, he wrote, “But who is living really, in the bottom of my soul?—the Christian, the pagan, or the man?”

One Little Coal

At twelve years old, I sat on a pew at the front of the chapel surrounded by boys older than me. Nervously, I stared at an index card with a map of the chapel. There were numbered lines displaying the route each boy would take in passing the bread and water

of the sacrament to the congregation. For weeks, I'd been preparing for the sanctity of the task. Youth leaders reiterated its importance again and again, but no one explained the logistics, how to actually do it. The oldest of my friends, I was the first to receive the Aaronic Priesthood—a stepping stone and rite of passage in the church—and thus be able to pass the sacrament. My excitement was dwarfed by the presence of the fourteen-year-olds, none of whom I knew. They seemed so serious and confident.

At the appropriate time we stood and received the heavy metal trays that held first the bread then later the water. My thin fingers wrapped around the handle until they went white. Horrified of tripping or dropping the tray, I worked my way down the row of pews. I'd walk my route participating in the performance of a sacred ordinance for several hundred people, many of them my neighbors and friends.

After we were done, each boy returned to the congregation to sit with his family. My mother put her arm around me, the nerves were gone. I was glowing; I could feel it and see it. The bishop, my father, rose to the pulpit. He seemed to shine just then as he said, "We'd like to thank the Aaronic Priesthood for the reverence with which they passed the sacrament," a stock line on any Sunday except that one.

Ancestry

The conflict John Cleaveland felt between his own spirituality and the rules being dictated to him by those in religious authority, rules that would keep him away from the revivals and the rising evangelical tide that had been such a part of his home life, seems to have run in his blood, much as it runs in mine. John's great, great grandfather (my

13th generation grandfather), Edward Bates, was not a member of the First Church in Boston long before he found himself exiled for heresy.

Edward's conflict started on the deck of the *Griffin*, a passenger ship headed to the new world. There wasn't much to do on the voyage to the colonies. As Charles Edward Banks notes of the passenger's life in his book *The Planters of the Commonwealth*, "They rose at the break of day to begin another round of nothing in particular." The passengers aboard the *Griffin* were lucky, carrying two preachers—Rev. Jonathan Lothrop, and Rev. Zachariah Symmes—along with the high spirited and controversial Anne Hutchinson. I imagine they had no lack of entertainment.

I picture Anne Hutchinson as she's portrayed in Edwin Austin Abbey's painting, *Anne Hutchinson on Trial*. She appears tall and thin, but not weak, her head tilted back, chin up in dignified resolution as she glances over at the men—a group of Massachusetts Bay Colony officials and clergy—who are about to banish her because she'd taken it upon herself to preach to those who'd listen. Hutchinson spoke freely about the problems she saw in the established ecclesiastical hierarchy, including the role of women in the church. She felt she had been divinely inspired to interpret the Bible, which she studied with ferocity.

I can see Edward sitting, back rested against a crate, knees pulled up to his chest, watching Anne Hutchinson take the good Reverend's twelve-rounds below the sails, a sea breeze billowing them on toward the colonies.

Upon arriving at the colonies, Hutchinson began holding regular bible studies, at first just for women. Soon men began attending, including Edward Bates. Did they sit in

the musty damp of a Massachusetts cabin discussing women's rights and civil liberties in general? Did she expound the virtues of questioning authority and establishment? Her following grew quickly, so did the fear of those holding the authority she questioned.

As with many of the *Griffin's* passengers, Edward came to the colonies as an indentured servant. Though, he was eventually made a freeman, his baptism record with the First Church in Boston lists him as, "manservant to our brother Thomas Leverett." I can only guess what sense of joy filled Edward the day he was given title to himself, some land, and necessities. Even more so, I cannot imagine the panic and dread he would have felt upon seeing his name, the name he had worked to have to himself, listed nineteenth on an order demanding he turn over, "all such guns, pistols, swords, powder, shot and match as [he] shall be owner of." The list of names, fifty-seven long, was part of an order of excommunication for heresy. Anne Hutchinson and anyone that could be seen as a follower of hers were to be removed from the church and thus, in the 1637 colonies, the community. The church hierarchy was afraid of a woman with power, afraid of what her ideas could do, and, as they listed in the order, they were afraid her followers might make "some suddaine irruption upon those that differ from them in judgment."

After some years, perhaps realizing the difficulties of exile, Edward Bates retracted his connection to Anne Hutchinson and was welcomed back into the church as a reformed man. Had Edward indeed changed his mind? Had he seen some truth in what the leaders of the colony had to say, or some fault in Hutchinson? Or, was it simply too hard fighting for daily necessities outside the care of the colonies? Were Hutchinson's ideas still true to him, but just not worth the consequence believing them carried? Despite

his apologetic return, Edward remained a bit of a troublemaker, and his only son, John Bates, kept that fire burning. Lydia, Edward's wife, said their son was, "a rogue, rascal and hell-bound." John, much like his father, was thrown out of the church for a short while, then later, upon going to King Philip's War, he felt compelled to confess his soul and reunite with the church.

One Little Coal

A letter to the editor titled, "Did You Sustain Your Prophet?" recently appeared in my local paper. The date of the letter in proximity to the Proposition 8 controversy—the proposition to ban same-sex-marriage in California—is too close to be ignored. In its closing the author—a member of the LDS Church—writes, "How can anyone sustain any of our priesthood leaders, or bear their testimony of this church, and then openly and publicly protest a moral stance that the church has taken?" I take little comfort in the fact that this author is forgetting leaders of the church sometimes speak for themselves not for the church, or that there is a difference between political and moral issues. At best I'm in disagreement with church leadership who, although they may only be speaking for themselves—according to the religion of my youth—have been given authority *by* God to speak *to* me.

Gordon B. Hinckley, a former President of the church, once said, "Be loyal to the Church under all circumstances. I make you a promise that the authorities of this Church will never lead you astray. They will lead you in paths of happiness." He went on to say, "Be true to your own convictions. You know what is right, and you know what is

wrong....You know when you are giving strength to the right cause.” This is the crux of my dilemma, what do you do when the two appear to be mutually exclusive.

From Exile

Resting his elbows on the guard rail of the S.S. President Coolidge, the stacks behind him billowing steam into the already fog filled night, he would have felt alone. At least that’s how I picture him that night in 1933. Did he press his sharply reverent face out into the ocean fog just off the coast of Japan? Did he wonder how long his term of exile must last? The following evening as he sat in his cabin, Chardin again wrote to Lucile Swan, the American artist and close friend, “No, I am not yet at the end of my road. But God has to help me. Truth does not break anything, I believe.” That road was not just his term of exile, but the path leading him through thickets of inner struggle and divide. It’s a hard isolation with nothing to break the chilling winds of separation when you find yourself in disagreement with the collective body of your faith.

Ancestry

Rector Clap had called the Cleaveland brother to his office to address the boy’s weekend activities. While on a short break from Yale, John and Ebenezer had taken a trip home where they went, with their parents, to hear their Uncle Solomon preach at a local revival. The visit was a relief to John who had long missed the warmth he felt at such meetings. As he wrote, he “studied very industriously but [was] very cold in religion.” It seems he was becoming more convinced those New Light preachers of the revival he’d heard his freshman year, preachers who challenged the very underpinnings

of the church saying authority to preach must come from God through spiritual experience not from man through ecclesiastical training, were right. This was before Clap had all such preachers banned from the school.

John wanted to find a solution to his inner conflict that wouldn't require abandoning either side; however, as time passed, it seemed less and less likely that the highly orthodox Clap, and those in the hierarchy like him, would allow such a balance to exist.

Despite having already written the Cleaveland brothers letter of expulsion, Clap told John and Ebenezer he would forgive the indiscretion if they wrote a formal confession and apology. John wrote a letter, but it only confessed to not being aware of how anything they had done was wrong. So, after four years at Yale and a lifetime of wanting to be a preacher, John Cleaveland now found himself in an uncomfortable position with only unfavorable options. Despite his regard for his Uncle Elisha, he had no desire to wind up imprisoned for preaching without a license, and under Connecticut law there were few religious positions he could legally fill without one, positions he felt would leave him unfulfilled. If, however, he moved out of Connecticut—albeit away from his family and the community of his youth and early adulthood—say to Massachusetts, there would be no such law requiring him to bend under official church rule.

One Little Coal

Sitting on the padded blue folding chair of a Latter-day Saint Sunday school room, surrounded by the clean cut faces of my peers, I should have felt a sense of

community. Dressed in my sharp brown suit, handsome full Windsor knot at my throat, I certainly looked the part of a young Latter-day Saint. Still, I could feel walls of separation between myself and the group. For a second, or was it third, attempt at regular church attendance as a young adult this wasn't off to a great start.

I'd spent the past couple of years under a self imposed sort of exile. A Sunday reading scripture in my bedroom was much more comfortable than three hours forcing myself not to play devil's advocate. It was easier to deal with the conflict of doctrinal disparity between myself and the church alone than surrounded by a hundred people who didn't understand why I couldn't just push the disagreements I felt under that table of faith we'd all come to for nourishment.

Like a married couple who find each attempt at reconciliation harder than the last because all the baggage they've picked up over the years, I found it hard to focus on the here and now, and my mind drifted to past awkwardness.

There is a murky puddle of memories in my head that go something like this: I'm sitting in a church meeting, a man in a suit a half size too big is teaching about the importance of positive influences. His face is nondescript; he's a pincushion man with a form but no features. He's talking about cutting the bad influences out of our lives (he tells the story of a friend who was slowly corrupted by the company he kept). Words bounce around the room, comments without owners, phrases that seem to attack friends of mine, favorite literature I've read, and non-Mormon art and academia in general. I feel something building inside of myself; I want to shout, tell them they are wrong, that we

can't hide from the world, that there is so much good out there that they're missing because they've labeled everything *not of us* as *against us*.

This memory is run over with another as a man rises from the shadow of a pulpit, his hands wrapping its edges. He's talking about other faiths, and at the same time, somehow, people in our faith who don't mesh with the culture, who don't march in the strict line of adherence to cultural idealism and orthodoxy, to the status quo. His voice booms, "You can't serve God if you're worrying about offending the devil." I can't remember worrying that I might offend the devil, but I do worry about offending those who believe or live differently than I do. Is that what he means by worrying about offending the devil? He smiles, but his words cut. Are they meant to do that? "If thy right hand offend thee cut it off." Am I an offending appendage, a cancer, too risky to allow spreading to other parts of the body?

Grotesque

I can picture O'Connor sitting at her desk pouring over her poetics, helping her characters find their way to salvation. The path for protagonists in her stories ends with what O'Connor called a "moment of grace," but she made them go through hell to get there. Or, more accurately she made them go through the desert. Richard Giannone—a noted O'Connor scholar—points out that the desert, albeit often a metaphoric one, is where the protagonist receives lessons preparatory for salvation. Is this more than a handy literary device? O'Connor herself must have felt the isolation of a desert after the loss of her father. Lupus, the same disease that would end her own life, claimed him when O'Connor was only fifteen, the effect was overwhelming. Was it in this time of loss

and separation that O'Connor discovered some piece of grace, the force that sustained her Christian faith throughout her life?

In what she once commented to a friend was the best thing she ever wrote, "The Artificial Nigger," O'Connor takes her character, Mr. Head (a racially biased small town southerner), from the Georgia country side to the big city of Atlanta and separates him from his grandson. Then, in the midst of confusion and fear, lost in an unknown landscape, Mr. Head comes to the conclusion that, "no sin was too monstrous for him to claim as his own, and since God loved in proportion as He forgave, he felt ready at that instant to enter Paradise." Through grace, Mr. Head had seen the error of his bias.

In what is possibly her most well known work, "A Good Man is Hard to Find," O'Connor's protagonist is a cantankerous grandmother whose desert is an old dirt road. Sticking to the grotesque, the grandmother's lesson requires the death of her family at the hands of O'Connor's famous Misfit. Here, the grandmother is alone on her knees at the barrel of the Misfit's gun. Her journey to the desert, isolation and exile, is complete and she receives her "moment of grace" recognizing the Misfit as one of her own children.

One Little Coal

Sitting in the middle of my bedroom I devour page after page of an article from the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. It's an article written by Richly Crapo, a professor from whom I once took an anthropology class. It's taking my religion, breaking it apart, trying to add definition and clarification to—as the title suggests—the *Grass-Roost Deviance from Official Doctrine: A Study of Latter-Day Saint Folk-Beliefs*. Every line is a salve as they address topic after topic that have eaten at me for years: evolution,

the age of the earth, signs of the times, and on, and on. I'm taking huge breaths, my chest visibly heaving as I grow more and more excited with each section. It's already past midnight but that doesn't even register. I call a friend, a skeptic believer like myself, she had been sleeping but it doesn't stop me; I read her line after line. "Wait listen to this, 'To the Mormon, commitment is primarily evidenced by participation rather than by 'faith' or 'belief.' The active member is presumed to be orthodox, but it is the participation, not the orthodoxy, that is the primary evidence of a member's allegiance.' Oh, and wait here's this, 'although Mormons view doctrine as flowing down from the church hierarchy to the members, the bulk of what Mormons think of as doctrine actually arises from the grass-roots level as members...construct a distinctive Mormon view of reality.'" I'm running out of breath as I read these quotes that explain how and why I've felt like a heretic, a dissident for most of my life. She's polite, tries to show excitement for me at my discovery, much more so than she needs to; this excitement, this moment of justification is a short reprieve.

From Exile

Chardin's desert was China, breaking apart dirt working on the discovery of the Peking Man. During his exile, he dug into the fossil record of the land as well as the borders between aspects of his own thoughts. While his separation was painful, it was also productive. Two of Chardin's greatest works, *The Divine Milieu* and *The Phenomenon of Man*, were written in exile.

One Little Coal

It's dark outside except for the soft glow of a corner streetlight. Sitting in the same spot where I read Crapo's dissection of Mormon culture, I read a talk given by one of the church's prophets almost two decades ago. He extols the importance of morality, suggesting that it were better that a youth in the church should lose their life than their virtue. It's better that they go home to God clean, than live a life unclean. I'm furious. I'm furious at a man I'm supposed to sustain as a prophet of God even though he died years ago. I'm furious for more reasons than I can count, but none of these reasons (the way this idea nullifies the atonement of Christ, the image it puts in my mind of a teenager cutting their wrist because they doubt their ability to control their hormones, the fact that it reeks of faulty fear tactics) none of them bother me as much as the cold that licks the back of my arms and neck as I think them. This isn't some random person preaching cultural unofficial doctrine from the pulpit at a testimony meeting, this is a man I accept as a prophet of God, this is Paul or Isaiah, this is Moses and I want to scream at him until I go hoarse. The cold is growing; I'm rolling myself out of the fire, away from the warmth of others, away from the warmth of the church. I can think of nowhere to turn. Alone, sitting in the middle of my bedroom, I start to let the cold take me.

Ancestry

Massachusetts held a lifetime of success and delight for John Cleaveland. From the town of Ipswich, he formed a sizable congregation, published several books and essays on theology and—far more importantly—as Jedrey notes, “he was able to define the nature of his ministry in a way satisfactory to himself and his parishioners.” For a

man who struggled, from early adulthood, with a faith torn in two, I can't think of a more satisfying end.

One Little Coal

Chardin and Cleaveland took O'Connor's journey into the desert and each, in some way, found an allotment of grace, neither man sacrificing personal conviction in the name of uniformity and orthodoxy. For some, perhaps for Edward Bates, the desert is too harsh, exile too cold a place to live a life. Here, exile is temporary, its repeal celebrated with the welcoming warmth of a community, joy at the prodigals return. I do not mock this celebration, but I cannot believe it's for me.

If I have rolled myself out of the fire away from the supporting warmth of a community of believers, as the edges of my body start to cool, the last bits of a warmth borrowed from others escaping into the night, I must remember not to shut my eyes. I must remember that at the center of the conflict that led me to exile, that clashing of realities, at the center of myself, there was a flame flickering, sometimes in rhythm with and sometimes against, the fires of those around me. I must believe that what I now lack from the radiating embers of others, I can find in the openness of the air around me. I must believe that, in the darkness of a desert night, a flicker can fill the sky.

CHAPTER III

The religious experiences which are the bedrock of religious commitment and understanding are several steps removed from the rational explorations of the meaning of such experiences.

—Blake T. Ostler

When I sketch the tree in my notebook, I'm compelled to leave out the braces—steal poles ranging from five to eighteen-feet tall, metal toothpicks, charged with the enormous task of supporting the horizontal spread of branches. I draw this tree, not as it is, not as it ever could be. Were it not for the braces the tree would have succumb to its own weight decades ago. Instead, I draw the tree as I wish it could be, as, were I God, I would allow it to be.

But this tree isn't the work of God. Well, not technically. An early nineteenth-century experiment in cross-breeding trees, the Ogden, Utah nursery owner who sold it to Roni, a Provo city worker tasked with collecting trees to decorate the outside of the court house, called it a weeping American elm. The UtahCounty government website points out, "it is the only known tree of its kind in the United States. Landscape experts have not been able to find another one like it." So, here, behind the Provo City Courthouse, stands this grand rare tree. A tree so unique even its own seeds haven't been able to reproduce it.

It's hard to imagine that Moroni Wilford Christopherson, whom friends called Roni, knew what he had gotten his hands on when he brought the tree down from Ogden to Provo in 1927. Could he have imagined what it would grow into? Had he known what a dump truck was, would he have ever guessed it would take seven of them just to haul off

the leaves this tree now sheds every fall? Did he see in his mind the bend and twist, curl, tuck and summersault its branches would take as they shot out to fill the trees table top form?

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I remember learning the steps of the scientific method in second grade, like learning the movements to a dance. Mrs. Barker, a tall thin woman who wore calf-length dresses with puffy sleeves and had a smile bordered in deep dimples, taught us the basics: First you notice something in nature, then you make a theory or hypothesis based on your observation, then you proceed to test your theory; this experimentation leads to results which are then analyzed, and you make assumptions from these results and start the process over, testing your new theory. This is the framework for developing scientific understanding.

Lately, I've been craving reason and logic; I've been starving for understanding of my experiences in life on a deeper, more detailed level than I ever have before. As an English composition instructor, I am constantly urging my students to push from abstraction into real concrete details and description. Don't tell me your faith sustained you, that's cliché and abstract, it's easy and undefined. What do you mean by faith? How did it sustain you? How is this mystical sustaining faith different than the faith you have that turning the ignition of your car will make it start, or the faith you have in the people around you, in their honesty and love? But it isn't my student's lack of concrete, base-level detail and understanding that has stirred this desire in me. It's been my own.

This hunger is the result of that decade long struggle to find some balance between that sense of reason that likes to poke holes in the religion of my youth and spiritual moments tied to that religion, moments I can only describe as, transcendent experiences with the divine, those enveloping experiences that have gone beyond reason to explode my understanding of the world. These are the moments I want to stuff in my pocket, like a child collecting rocks from the garden. As I step out from the authority and orthodoxy of the Church, I hate the idea of letting these experiences become merely memories from some past life.

Reading *The Book of Mormon* one winter morning I lost myself. Not the way I lose myself in a good movie or captivating book. Reading the words that describe Christ's visit to America (a core belief of the LDS faith) the words stopped existing as letters on the page. I don't remember how long I was reading, can't recall turning those onion skin pages or ending the chapter, just coming back to the room. I'm not claiming an out of body experience—though I struggle to come up with something else to call it—but I've never, before or since, felt the emotions of a moment for which I wasn't present in such detail that they could belong to no other moment in history, in such detail that simply reading an account of the event doesn't provide enough information to create them.

I want to believe that I have it within myself to reconcile these two, that my own good sense is enough to find a spot where I can balance the reason that circles in my brain with the spiritual experiences that have entirely overwhelmed my heart. I place a lot of stock in the individual's good sense. After all, it is the source of almost every

development in modern society. Computers, automobiles, vaccinations, the layout and design of cities, government and financial infrastructures have all come about by people applying logic to a problem or need. Sixteenth-century French philosopher Rene Descartes seems to have been the first champion of the individual's capacity to reason. As Russell Shorto says of Descartes in his book, *Descartes Bones*,

His reorientation of knowledge so that it was no longer based on collective authority (what the king decrees, what the church demands) but on a newly empowered *self*—the individual mind and its “good sense”—became a starting point for the development of democracy, psychology, and much else that we think of as modern.

Descartes' groundbreaking *Discourse on Method* lay the groundwork for the scientific method that Mrs. Barker would teach me hundreds of years later. While a contemporary approach might say that the man who dug the foundation for scientific understanding must surely have been free of such delusions as God and angels—science and religion often portrayed as very much at odds in most of pop-culture and academia—Descartes was, to the end, and ardent and believing Catholic.

*

Standing beneath the massive tree's naked winter canopy, I feel like a child swept off to Neverland. Surely, the network of branches would make a fitting home for Peter Pan. Even wrapped in the chill of a January evening, the tree screams life: from the rise and dive of each branch—a physical hallelujah—to the visible struggle of the whole to support each of its parts. This tree is a firework caged in bark, sparks and flares shooting

every direction dragging heavy branches with them as they dance, thirty-feet at times, out into the air.

This tree is not logical; it is beautiful.

It is the corporeal representation of our human nature to be oblivious to boundaries; or, not to be oblivious to them, but to recognize them, give them a happy wave and a nod, and then walk right through them. But here, again, I'm erasing the tree's braces from my mind. Without these braces the tree's branches would break under the weight of their own beauty.

Is this the curse of the human eye, and mind: to see past the tips of our fingers, the fence at the edge of the yard, the street sign, corner curb and city boundary? We can see, from the top of a mountain, forever, until the details blur into a mesh of *beyond* that our minds take in, but cannot identify on any concrete level. Here, I have to ask myself, as I reach for a more concrete understanding of my personal spiritual experiences: Are these moments part of that mesh of beyond? Am I only meant to take them in as waves of distant light and color that cannot be deciphered clearly enough to yield solid understanding? If I remove the braces of religion that have provided me with an understanding of these experiences, if I examine them in the context of any reality other than the one my religious upbringing formed for them will they break under the weight of their beauty? What consequences lie in wait for me as I stretch my arms out, trying for a moment, to touch the light?

*

“We are skeptics or true believers” says Chet Raymo, professor of physics and astronomy at Stonehill College in Massachusetts and author of a weekly science column for the *Boston Globe*. According to Raymo, a skeptic is someone, religious or not, who doesn’t take anything to be a fact easily. Skeptics question everything, even their cherished beliefs.

Descartes took this practice to the extreme. Somewhere between 1619 and 1628, he set out to strip himself of everything he believed so that he could start from scratch, without bias, leaning basic absolute truths. His first discovery during this time was his ground level truth—a truth he would come back to again and again as he worked at learning others—“I think, therefore I am.” Still, even Descartes felt the risk inherent in his task. He gave a warning, “The single design to strip one’s self of all past beliefs is one that ought not to be taken by every one.” He seemed to feel that some people could handle the vertigo that comes with removing “all belief,” better than others.

True believers, as Raymo describes them, “Seek simple and certain truths, provided by a source that is more reliable than the human mind.” Perhaps the most defining characteristic of a true believer, to me, is the ability to accept things blindly, not only believing things without evidence—that is part of faith—or believing in something that someone else can find evidence or present an argument against—that could be seen as faith in the face of trials—but often believing things that don’t agree in their own mind, things which some part of their own logic tells them can’t be right but which they accept in the name of faith.

For most of my life I've been a skeptic but believing Mormon. This hasn't always been an easy lifestyle. As Raymo writes, "If (skeptics) are theists, they wrestle with their God in a continuing struggle of faith. They are often plagued by personal doubts." I cannot overlook contradictions or inconsistencies in theology and history the way a true believer might. Even Descartes placed a caveat in his *abandon everything* experiment, allowing himself to hold onto the core of his Christian faith. As he clarifies (while explaining the temporary morality he would live by during this time when his own morality was to be under deconstruction) he would live according to the law of his country and, "[hold] firmly to the religion in which, by the grace of God, [he] had been instructed from [his] infancy." So, here I am at twenty-nine-years of age realizing that for the better part of the past decade, I've been doing the inverse of Descartes experiment. I've left up many of the beliefs he tore down, while utterly dismantling the one thing he left standing. I've deemed him right in, and praise him for, so many things. Could Descartes' fear in letting go of the religion he was raised in be a notice I should have heeded? Though, there is no one question, or even a group or list of questions that have led me to this point. It's not their use of faulty fear tactics or the churches stance against same-sex marriage that are dismantling that structure, but rather the all encompassing nature of the church's grasp on knowledge, their authority to name right and wrong. How can I grant them that absolute authority, when I clearly can't agree with any number of their calls? But I am not Descartes and my deconstruction was not a planned one, I never consciously orchestrated this self interrogation of my beliefs.

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As part of my religious upbringing in the LDS Church, I was allowed to skip out on one class every other day in high school. During this time I was to attend (in a building just off the school grounds) a religious seminary class. There, surrounded by pictures of prophets and pioneers, I learned about God and his plan for me. I'll admit I was more interested in whatever girl happened to be sitting next to me than what was being said, and most of my seminary memories are filled with their giggles rather than the teacher's sermonic words. Still, a few things stand out: I remember an unfriendly looking teacher with puffy blonde hair telling us a story about a man he knew who once saw Satan riding down the stream from a shower head into his body—though I forget what I was supposed to learn from this story. I think it had something to do with avoiding drugs. I remember a number of stories meant to explain the importance of Christ's sacrifice and its impact and purpose in each of our individual lives. But by far, the thing I remember the most is this other teacher, a balding scarecrow of a man, telling us that we couldn't and shouldn't believe in God, Christ, or the church for any reason other than a personal answer from God that he was there and the things we were taught in church were true. I clung to that idea.

So much of my religious life at that point was filled with people telling me that the "Church was true" often emphasizing that I should believe for the sake of believing, or that if I wanted to have some sort of spiritual experience I first had to believe, a kind of fake it till you make it mentality that didn't sit well with me intellectually. Here though, I had this scarecrow in a suit and tie telling me not to believe unless I received evidence,

through an undeniable spiritual experience, that God was there. I let this sink into my mind like a personal motto—one which fit nicely next to the dozens of motto's I picked up from punk rock songs which all said close to the same thing, "Question everything." I felt quietly empowered in the face of anyone who dared tell me anything that sounded like a dressed up version of the fake it till you make it idea.

*

Religion, particularly the religion of my youth, has been for most of my life the lens through which I viewed and interpreted my personal spiritual experiences. A lens built on, "collective authority," "what the Church demands." These experiences have in turn been the foundation that supported my belief in the very religion I was using to interpret them. Here's the problem. How can I know that, had I been raised in an orthodox Muslim, or Catholic, or Buddhist home, I wouldn't have had the same experiences and thus interpreted these experiences in a different light? How can I know that the experiences I had while reading *The Book of Mormon* and *Bible* couldn't have happened while reading the *Bhagavad-Gita*, or the *Koran*; how can I be sure that whatever divinity is out there doesn't just love any attempt to connect with it?

Without the circular structure my Religion and these experiences built—one strengthening the other as it in turn explains and adds meaning to and a framework for the first—how am I to handle those moments when I've felt touched by divinity? If I remove the brace of religion, will I be left holding the tree? And can I bear the weight?

There is a part of me that wants to fully turn to modern science as this dilemma's answer, a part that wants to worship at the alter of Dawkins and Hawking. Still, I resist

this, looking for a more middle ground. The academic fields of science and religion seem constantly to bicker back and forth, one picking on the other. I stumble over dozens of books arguing for or against the validity of each field. Always, these books are written by scholars from the opposing camp. All scientist and theologians, however, do not feel this conflict. As discussed earlier, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Jesuit priest and paleontologist, spent most of his life fighting for a balance between the two, both within himself and in the world. Francis Collins, head of the federal governments Human Genome Project is a practicing evangelical Christian. Henry Eyring, father of the apostle Henry B. Eyring, and a faithful Mormon himself until his death in 1981, won nearly every scientific award besides the Nobel Prize, for which he was repeatedly nominated. This trend goes back much farther. In fact, as Russell Shorto discusses the three camps that can be classified from the Enlightenment: 1, the priests fighting against the scientific revolution; 2, the philosophers and revolutionaries who felt this enlightenment should be the death of religion; and 3, the moderates who wanted to apply Cartesian thinking to both the natural world and religion, he says, “The moderate camp includes some of the most well known figures of the Enlightenment, names that have filled the humanities syllabi for generations: Montesquieu, Newton, Locke, Jefferson, Hobbes, Voltaire.” These are the minds behind some of the most significant breakthrough in modern history.

Stephen J. Gould, one of the most noted scientific writers of his generation, argued that this conflict is merely an illusion. “I speak of the supposed conflict between science and religion, a debate that exists only in people’s minds and social practices, not in the logic or proper utility of these entirely different, and equally vital, subjects.” Gould

sees these two fields, not only as not conflicting, but not interacting. It seems that while he feels they both have much to offer humanity, they have little to offer each other. NOMA, or Non-Overlapping Magisteria as he deems it, is the idea that science and religion are both beneficial fields of study that should never overlap, science dealing with how things work, religion with how men and women ought to work. As he says, “I do not see how science and religion could be unified, or even synthesized, under any common scheme of explanation or analysis.” Play nice, and keep your hands to yourself.

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In the eighty-three-years since the weeping American elm was planted behind the Courthouse, it has shown great resilience. It has had a city thrown up around it. The dust of construction and the vibration of massive earth moving machines didn't stop its growth. It withstood wind storms that threw down trees and telephone poles. Hordes of voracious nibbling insects have infested it, but here, eighty-three years old, it stands magnificent enough still to fill me with awe. Granted, it hasn't done all of this on its own. In 1980 the tree was officially listed as “historic” and became protected by various laws and organizations. Signs warn, “Historic Tree Do Not Climb.” When the tree was being treated like a banquet by invading aphids, city workers transplanted lady bugs by the thousands to take care of the problem. And the tree spreads over the east lawn spanning the distance between buildings and it grows, so we enable it. We, humans, who are so apt to destroy nature in the name of asphalt development and steel structures, have built braces for it, pruned it back to help it grow forward, fertilized it, and given it daily checkups. We have placed this tree upon our backs because its existence has spread the

walls of our minds. And we cherish things that can do that—show us something apparently unexplainable. We polish and protect them, perhaps to a fault.

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Not convinced by NOMA, many scientists have tried to apply their trade to understanding what goes into spiritual experiences. Some try to identify what makes one person more prone to spirituality than another. In her book *Fingerprints of God*, Barbara Bradley Hagerty coins this field the “Neuroscience of Religiosity.” Here, scientists are looking for religious traits in our genes. Is there something in the building blocks of who I am that makes me more prone to have an ecstatic religious experience than my neighbor? Francis Collins expressed his disagreement with this idea in a conversation with Hagerty, “I have been a blatant materialist during a significant part of my life, an atheist with no use for god. I am now a very serious believer. My DNA did not change during that time interval.” This echoes much of the nature/nurture discussion happening in other fields. Is it my upbringing in a family that had an LDS bishop as the father and a black sheep intellectual as a brother that has placed me in this divide, or was it always there, written into my genes waiting for something to spark it to life?

While some scientist are looking into our genes to see why one individual is more prone to moments of transcendence than another, others occupy themselves searching for chemical coders, measuring dopamine and serotonin, digging for the processes behind the ecstatic. Is God hiding in my prefrontal lobe, dancing, at times, through my limbic system? Possibly. When Hagerty posed this question to Pat McNamara, scientist at BostonUniversity, his response was measured but telling, “Theoretically, if God wanted

to communicate with us, then He, She, or It would create a biology that allows for that sort of relationship. But the fact that there is a specific biology of religiosity does not rule in—or rule out—God.” It makes sense that God would hardwire his creations with the systems and chemicals needed to feel...well, him, her or it.

This all still feels like I’m missing something. Sticking to the mindset of that moderate camp Shorto pointed out, I can see both nature and nurture working in these moments, both my genes and my upbringing surrounded by prayer, building on each other, taking me to these times when my systems rush with serotonin and dopamine. And something more. I’m always urging my students to remember the *why*. It’s easy to grab the *who*, *what*, *where*, *how*, and then forget the *why*. That’s what this equation is missing. That’s what religion fills with its explanations of these moments. “Why? Because God is there, because he loves you.” It makes sense: God, as an answer to the why, but all too often the religions handing out this answer want an all or nothing contract too. “If you had this experience, it means not only is there a God, but that he wants you to join us, and since we’re the ones telling you, you should believe everything we have.” I tell my students to be wary of false dilemmas, all or nothing arguments, yet I let this reasoning run my spiritual life, kicking against my sense of reason, for over two decades.

What is one to do, when the cracks in the structure become too big, when they realize all or nothing won’t cut it? Perhaps this is why I like Cloninger. The psychiatrist who developed the self-transcendence scale—the questionnaire most commonly accepted and used by researchers to gauge a person’s spirituality—Robert Cloninger also believed there was something missing, some third element to the equation. Yes, he felt nature was

ingrained in the process and nurture played its role, but he also saw something else off in the distance, something *mystical*, just beyond the point of focus. Was it God? Gods? I can't say we will ever know. Still, this is how I feel, like just beyond the tip of my outstretched arm, three degrees off focus, is the answer to the *why* that sits heavy upon my chest. Perhaps, this is why I fear losing these moments. If I can't keep them tangible, real, if as the reality provided by my religion continues to crumble and fade these moments do too, I fear I will lose the chance to ever get at that why. But, no, it's more. If I lose these moments I'm losing essential parts of myself, experiences filled with emotion, beauty and meaning.

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A one-of-a-kind tree, hybrid or not, is a hard idea to buy. Sitting at my desk, eyes dried from staring at a computer monitor, I scan through images of other elms. There are large elms and small elms. There are elms with thick branches like my weeping American elm, but these ones, these other elms, branch off at two and eleven o'clock, not a sharp three and nine. I even find a picture of an elm with branches that twist and bend a little, but not with the flourish of a Japanese maple or bonsai like the branches of this historic tree, hiding between buildings in downtown Provo.

Is this tree a miracle or is it a fluke. If it was an experiment, can it be determined a success? Its results, if they were what the breeder predicted, have not been repeated. Somehow, this makes me happy. I don't want another weeping American elm. Not that its beauty lies only in its singularity; if there were hundreds they would each be worth a visit. Still, it feels wrong, the idea to keep trying, as if it were somehow insulting this tree

to try and duplicate it. However, that is one of the strengths of science, the ability to make a mistake, analyze it, and try again. This makes the soft spots, where the scientist can't quite get his footing, also some of the most interesting. It's a form of redemption, this scientific trial and error, the great miracle of science: As soon as a failure or mistake is acknowledged and the theories are moved back an appropriate step, the ground firms up instantly and they can once again dig their hands into the unknown while kneeling on solid ground. As James A. Arieti and Patrick A. Wilson point out in *The Scientific and the Divine*, "One of the features of modern science, by contrast [to religion], is its revisability." This is a miracle religion denies itself.

It seems like a long held rule in most (if not all religions) that to admit that some aspect of the religion is wrong, that some mistake has been propagated through doctrine or cultural tenets, is akin to heresy. Anytime reason or hindsight shows us that somewhere along the line religion screwed up, we deny logic in the name of faith. We adjust the way we tell our history, brushing the tattered pieces under the rug, or create elaborate apologetic arguments in an attempt to discredit logic and those who would dare point out religions' faults. Within my own faith, the argument was often that those who acknowledge these moments of religious fault either lack faith, or far worse, are the Apostles Paul's, "grievous wolves" in the midst of the flock. For the religious zealot, the soft spots are not interesting. They are terrifying.

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I remember being invited one Sunday during my senior year to speak to a group of younger teens about the importance of having a testimony of the church. I was

supposed to be a shining example of faith, one of the big kids running the high school that these youngsters could look up to. I don't know that I gave them what they wanted. When it was my turn to talk I stood and, with all the fervor of a television evangelist—an uncommon and usually unwelcome form of presentation in the Mormon church—I preached about the importance of the word “If” vs. “That.” With a sea of wide eyes looking up at me, I passionately demanded that we not ask to know “*That* the church is true” in our prayers—as I'd commonly heard people say. This was a mistake, it was close minded, it was the harbor from which blind faith set sail; I was sure of it. No, I said, we must ask “*If* things are true in our prayers.” “If” was open minded, it was in the spirit of questioning, it was true seeking rather than lip service covering a desire to fit in with the community of believers. Though I didn't see it the day I made my little rant, I was beginning to argue—if only with myself—for a more scientific attitude, a deductive approach to spirituality.

Years later, sitting in the Celestial room of the Mount Timpanogos Temple (a sacred room meant to represent the highest level of heaven, a place for meditation, reflection and silent prayer) I posed a question to God. I'd come that night with a specific problem, what it was isn't important, the fact that it could be answered with a yes or no is. I'd always heard stories of people praying until their knees hurt, telling God that they weren't going to stand until they had received an answer.

I'd tried this concept before, told God I wasn't going to move until I knew, until I got an answer like a brick to the head, but my body always gave out. Sometimes fifteen minutes in, sometimes thirty or forty, my joints beyond burning, my bones aching from

the marrow out, I would decide that some small tingle of emotion must have been God's answer. Later, I would always doubt these experiences, wishing I would have been able to conquer my physical body and really wait it out for something undeniable.

This night though, I was desperate. I made my case clear to God, told him this time I meant it, I was really in it for the long haul. Time passed in measurements of discomfort. First my ankles, then my hips (I've always had bad hips), then my knees and shoulders, one by one these aches, some dull others sharp, marked moments for which any other measurement seems irrelevant. I remember a possible solution to my problem creeping into my mind. *Is that it, is that God's answer*, I thought. *No*, I told myself, *not if I can possibly ask is that it*. The weight of my bowed head strained my neck, each vertebra's position emphasized in my mind. Then, somewhere in the midst of these measurements of pain, it came. Yes. A yes so solid I could feel each letter's imprint on the space below my ribs (one of the few parts of my body not in pain). Years later, despite all the questions and doubts that I've developed, that moment, that answer, unlike all those before remains as undeniable in my mind as the feel of the computer keys below my fingers.

Though, what I couldn't yet see, both in the temple and years before as I gave that speech to those kids in church, was the conflict inherent in using a specific religion's lens to interpret spiritual experience, since whatever else it meant, the experience was also usually interpreted to mean that you should follow that religion. But, by abandoning the framework of interpretation given to me in my youth, I've left myself with nothing but my own sense of reason to navigate these transcendent experiences. Descartes' statement,

“I think, therefore I am” buoys my mind as I think about this task. If, as Descartes suggests, the basis for reality is knowing that I exist, because someone has to be doing the thinking going on in my head, then it makes sense that I am the ultimate filter for understanding my own reality, not the church, not Chardin or O’Connor or even Descartes. If I believe this idea is right, the only way to come to any form of truth, any solid permanent reality, is to toss myself into those smashing waves of uncertainty—no life preserver or safety line—and grapple for the shore myself.

In his history of the conflict between faith and reason, Shorto expands on Descartes’ brief declaration, “If my own thoughts are the only indubitable ground I can stand on, apparently they aren’t so flimsy after all.” Perhaps this is why ecstatic spiritual experiences most often take place on an individual level. The only evidence of humanity’s contact with the divine (and as such the only evidence of the divine) lies in the individual’s contact with it. Not in the results that played out after the experience—churches that have spanned the globe, art inspired by these experiences, life changes people made because of these moments where they felt completely overcome by something beyond their senses—but in the moment the prophet, the painter, the individual felt overcome. It is in its involvement with the individual that the divine best shows its existence.

Francis Collins once said, “So it is with scientists exploring spirituality: they know that millions of people genuinely experience transcendence—but what, exactly, is the mechanics of that feeling.” If I look at my spiritual experiences deductively, holding on to them, not what I’ve interpreted them to mean, but holding onto the moments simply

as existing, refusing to let them slip from my grasp as the reality that once gave them meaning crumbles, couldn't I then use them as sign posts marking the spots where the ground is solid, where I could start, again and again, to dig out new territory of spiritual reality?

Descartes, like Cloninger, felt that there was something more. He theorized that the universe contained three substances: the mind (human thought), the body (the physical world), and God. Thinking back to the times I've stood below the arching, wonderful branches of that weeping American elm, the result of someone applying their mind, their logic, to the physical world around them—two of these three universal substances—I can't help but wonder what could come from the logical application of the human mind to those experiences that connect us to the divine—that third substance. So, I will dig my fingers into these moments holding them under logic's light where perhaps their details, the dimensions that make these moments tangible, can be better seen. Maybe the reality ushered in by questions and uncertainties doesn't have to cause me to lose these moments, but can, in fact, make them more real. Because, braces or not, it is in our very nature to arch and twist, spiraling off after understanding.

CHAPTER IV

But we shall meet here again,—before long,—and pick up together the fruits of the absence.

—Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

Brown and tan stones leading to the teeth of the battlement, yellow gold trim marking each story, twin white towers capped with metal weather vane, this all makes the Logan, Utah Temple seem...well, mythical. It's an ancient castle atop a hill. If I try, I can imagine a company of knights battling some great grand beast on the front lawn that spreads down a steep hill. Really, inside are loyal members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. They are performing sacred ordinances for themselves and vicariously for the dead who had no chance to do so in life. My mother works, a volunteer service position, as a guide helping church members as they go through the Mount Timpanogos Temple. I'm looking at this temple, two hours north of the Timpanogos, through an iron circle the size of a softball. The circle is a design aspect of the fence that surrounds the temple grounds, but this is how I've grown used to looking at temples.

Throughout my life, I've often taken walks around Latter-day Saint temple grounds. Living at my parents' home in American Fork, Utah, I'd end every Sunday with a lap or two around the Mount Timpanogos Temple, that one a geometric castle, elegant blocks building to a spire topped with a golden statue of the angel Moroni. Moroni tops almost all of the LDS temples; he stands back arched, head back, golden horn toward the sky trumpeting the return of "the fullness of the gospel" to the earth.

Most of my walks around the Timpanogos Temple were pleasant, filled with frank conversations to God about my life: Struggles I was facing, things I was grateful for, ideas I wanted to run past him. I'd always pause around the east side of the temple and examine the large narrow window that was the central feature of that side. It has a strand of wavy shimmering glass in the middle, bordered by vertical rows of reflective squares on each side. The middle represents prayers going to heaven, the outside answers flowing down. At the top of this window is a giant circle representing God.

When I moved away to Logan, Utah to attend college, my walks around the temple changed. Not because the temple changed. The Logan Temple is just as awe inspiring as the Timpanogas. I changed. I was starting to feel uncomfortable in the church. I didn't feel worthy to participate in Temple service, some of the most sacred forms of worship in the LDS faith. So, my walks became heavier, the ornate metal fence surrounding the temple grounds seemed less beautiful and more cold; it was the barrier between me and what I thought I should be. I wasn't orthodox. I couldn't walk the line I felt the church required of me. My talks to God changed too. Sometimes these talks were sorrowful, pleading for forgiveness for the way I was. Other times, they were hopeful, filled with plans of how I was going to fix myself. Regardless of how I felt when I arrived or what the walk entailed, I always felt good as the walk came to an end.

I've come back today, for the first time in over a year, to walk the outside of the Logan Temple grounds. It's awkward at first. The temple is set stoic against a blue sky. I dig my hands into my pockets and start the walk. It doesn't take long before I begin, bumbling inside my head, to address God. What do you say to a God you feel you no

longer know? Previous topics feel irrelevant, and as such, I begin with a new confession: “I feel you’re there; I hope you’re there, but I have no idea what you’re like.” Is this what it’s like, praying for the first time, for someone who wasn’t brought up in a religious home? A piece of a Chardin quote pops into my head, “My dearest faith is that something Loving is the deepest essence of the growing universe.” I share this with my new unknown God. Although, unknown isn’t right, as I round the southwest corner of the temple and start to head up its hill something familiar strikes me, the same feeling I had on my old walks, only, maybe in a different key. It’s like talking to a friend you haven’t seen in so long that you can’t make out the features of their face anymore, but there’s something of home, still, in the sound of their voice. As I walk, my view of the temple changes, different angles showing different details, but always with the metallic overlay of the looping fence. It hits me as I realize this, the tonal difference, the change of key. It’s peace. Walking the outside of these grounds, chatting up an old friend, I’m not burdened by what I’m not, by definitions of what the faithful should be. I am no saint. I am not, for all the respect I hold for him, for the lifeline his example once provided me, Chardin. I’m ready to fully step into that new reality, the reality of questions and uncertainty, the reality that once seemed so badly in need of some source of authority to grant it stability.

As I descend the hill on the opposite side of the temple, the sun reflects off a swath of old snow. This isn’t fluffy, pristine snow. It’s been weeks since our last storm. Its crystals shine hard and worn, but worn smooth, polished over time by the elements that surround it. The sun is brilliant, a child’s yellow-crayon ball on blue paper. Its

reflection makes me stop and take account of the moment. It's a moment well worth taking account.

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