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WOMEN, PRIESTHOOD AND THE RLDS EXPERIENCE

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I HAVE BEEN THINKING about women and the priesthood for a long time now. In about 1980, I wrote an article for *Dialogue* in which I argued that we should consider priesthood for women. Looking back on it, it wasn't all that great an article, but I think it was one of the first, if not the first, public discussions about priesthood for Mormon women.

A few years later, I got a phone call one night from my friend George Smith, who called to tell me that the prophet had had a revelation and that women were to have the priesthood. I said something like, "Yeah, right, sure, George." And I waited for the punch line. Instead of a punch line, George told me that he was serious, that the prophet had had a revelation, but that it was the prophet of the RLDS church.

Despite my intense interest in the topic of priesthood for women, until the summer of 1986, while I believed in theory that women should have the priesthood, I remained personally somewhat indifferent to it. Mostly, I wanted women to have a voice—an equal voice—in the church, and I couldn't think of a way to have that happen without women having the priesthood. To this day, I still can't.

But something happened in August of 1986 to change my outlook on women and the priesthood. That summer, I went to my first Sunstone Symposium, where I attended a panel on women and the priesthood presented by some members of the RLDS church, including two women who had been ordained. One was an elder, the other was a deacon.

As I listened to these women, I realized that they had responded to a call from God that had blessed their lives and the lives of those whom they served in their priesthood capacities. I realized what perhaps some of you have realized—that despite the statements that LDS women make that they don't want the priesthood, that they don't want the responsibility, that they already do all the work in the church and they don't need to do more, despite the jokes LDS women make about holding the priesthood every night, despite the

assertions they already enjoy all the blessings of the priesthood—despite all this, women in the LDS church really are missing out on something consequential and meaningful and vital to their spiritual lives by their exclusion from priesthood.

I think that there is much we can learn from the RLDS experience of ordaining women. First of all, we can learn that ordaining women is good for women as individuals. It gives women new opportunities to use their own, unique, God-given gifts in new and expanded ways. It provides new avenues for spiritual growth and development. It encourages deepening spiritual insight, faith and commitment.

Secondly, we can learn that ordaining women is good for women as a class. I dare say that throughout the LDS church, thousands upon thousands of women, maybe millions, including many who would never dream of calling themselves feminists, feel misunderstood, ignored and devalued, at least sometimes, in a church where all decisions are made by men, with only as much input from women as those men choose to allow. And even if women don't consciously feel denigrated, they internalize the subconscious message that women are second-class citizens in the household of faith.

Exclusion from priesthood affects women's self-esteem. It affects the way men and women and boys and girls value (or devalue) women's contributions in the church. It creates a problem that will never be solved—can never be solved, until women serve in all capacities in the church on an equal basis with men.

The third thing we can learn from the RLDS experience is that including women in priesthood callings is good for everyone—men and women alike. At that Sunstone panel I attended nearly nine years ago, someone during the question and answer period asked whether there was any chance that the RLDS church leadership would change their minds at some point in the future and revert to a "males only" policy. Paul Edwards, a panel member who was, as I recall, the RLDS High Priests Group Leader, said, "Oh, maybe when

hell freezes over." He went on to say that having women have the priesthood had been such a positive experience for both men and women that there was no way they would go back to excluding women.

Fourth, we can learn a much-needed lesson about dealing with diversity and dissent, about conflict resolution and about pulling together for the common good even when we don't always get our way. I think it is safe to say that not every RLDS believer was ecstatic about the decision to ordain women. There was significant dissent and, in some places, I understand, there still is. While there might not be any one perfect way to resolve every disagreement, the RLDS experience should teach us that people with diverse views need to feel that they have a means of being heard within the church, and that people who feel they have a fair opportunity to make their voices heard will feel much better about a collective decision, even if their views don't prevail, than people who have a hierarchical decision imposed on them.

Fifth, and last for now, we can learn that including women in priesthood councils can make those councils more Christlike and more likely to place a greater value on the needs of people than on the hierarchical, corporate values of a church institution. The LDS church leadership has, in recent years and in the last few decades, grown ever-more obsessive about, and insistent on, deference and obedience

to authority.

Evidence of this obsession took on new heights for me a couple of years ago when an apostle, speaking in a general conference priesthood session, urged deference to hierarchy in a number of ways. Included in those ways was the explanation that when members of the Quorum of the Twelve enter a room, each junior member stands aside to allow those senior to him to enter first. He further explained the scriptural precedent for this practice, namely, that on the morning of the Resurrection, John outran Peter to the empty tomb, but he waited outside until Peter arrived, so that Peter could enter first. Somehow, missing from this story was the obvious recognition that the first at the tomb, and the first in the tomb, were women. Also lost on this speaker was the teaching of Jesus that whoever would be the greatest must be the servant of all.

I applaud the RLDS church for its progressive and courageous action in seeking and following a revelation in which I suppose the Holy Spirit whispered, "Do not wonder that some women of the church are being called to priesthood responsibilities." In so doing, they moved their church ever-closer to Paul's ideal, stated in his letter to the Galatians, that "there is no more Jew nor Greek, no more bond nor free, no more male nor female, for we are all one in Christ Jesus."

On Being Excommunicated

JANICE M. ALLRED

ON MAY 9, 1995, I WAS excommunicated from the Mormon church. During the previous few years, the church had been aggressively pursuing people it perceived to be openly and publicly unorthodox or dissenting. I was among them. After a disciplinary council held the previous October, I had been placed on formal probation by my bishop for "conduct contrary to the laws and order of the church." In my essay "My Controversy with the Church" (*MWF Quarterly* 6:1), I describe and interpret the October court and the events that led to it. In this essay I discuss the charges brought against me, my defense against these charges and what being excommunicated means to me. While this is my story, I believe that the issues I struggled with are important to every member of the church; indeed, they are foundational to religious community itself. My purpose in sharing my story is to engage others in these issues and persuade them to envision and work for a more loving, open and tolerant church community.

In the October court I was charged with apostasy for dis-

obeying my church leaders and for teaching false doctrine. I had published my speech, "Toward a Mormon Theology of God the Mother," against the counsel of my stake president and, according to my leaders, this article contained false doctrine. I defended myself against the charge of apostasy for disobedience by pointing out that there is no church law which requires us to obey the directives of priesthood leaders or be punished. In my view, such a law would be contrary to the principle of free agency, contrary to the gospel of Jesus Christ and contrary to revelation from God. "No power or influence can or ought to be maintained by virtue of the priesthood, only by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned" (D&C 121:41).

I defended myself against the charge of apostasy for teaching false doctrine by calling the court's attention to the definition of apostasy given in the *General Handbook of Instructions*. This definition states that apostasy is "persist[ing] in teaching as Church doctrine information which is not Church doctrine." In my article I specifically stated

that the interpretation of the Godhead I offered was not church doctrine.

After the October court my bishop presented me with a list of conditions he expected me to follow. Failure to follow the conditions would result in reconvening the court, he told me in the official letter informing me of the court's decision. The conditions required me to: (1) "Stay in regular contact and be willing to counsel with your bishop," (2) "Not publish or speak in opposition to the doctrine of the Church as contained in the four standard works or official statements of the First Presidency," and (3) "Refrain from clear and open opposition and criticism of the Church or its leaders."

After receiving these conditions I wrote an open letter to my bishop informing him of some objections I had to the conditions and telling him of my intentions in regard to them. I protested his use of the word "sacred" to describe the conditions with its implication that the conditions were dictated by God and that I was under a covenant obligation to obey them. I also pointed out that his second and third conditions attempted to define apostasy more broadly than the definitions given in the handbook. I said that although I had no intention of opposing church doctrine, I recognized that my interpretation of church doctrine often differed from my bishop's. Nevertheless, I refused to submit to any kind of supervision or censorship of my writing and speaking. I also refused to give up my right to disagree and dissent. Although I was willing to counsel with my bishop, I intended to follow my own conscience.

A second disciplinary council was held on May 9, 1995. The charge was that I had broken the conditions of my probation. My bishop's strategy was to show that I had, indeed, broken the conditions of my probation and to equate breaking them with apostasy. Since the conditions were my bishop's directives to me, not the law of the church, his strategy amounted to defining apostasy as not following the directives of leaders. But, as I had shown in my defense at the first court, disobedience to leaders is not apostasy, and punishing members for disobeying leaders is an abuse of priesthood power.

My bishop questioned me about several actions he thought violated the conditions. First he questioned me about the speech I gave at the Counterpoint Conference on November 5, 1994, "My Controversy with the Church." In this speech, I told about my experiences in being disciplined by the church and discussed issues I think are important for all church members to consider. Although my bishop had neither heard the speech nor read it, he had read an account of it in a newspaper article. He believed that the speech contained criticism of the church and its leaders.

Next he expressed concern regarding all the newspaper articles about me. The bishopric felt I should have kept the discipline taken against me confidential. I explained that

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the purpose of the rule requiring confidentiality is to protect the privacy of the member. I had not broken any legal or moral rule by speaking about my problems with the church. I reminded my bishop that I had always been honest about my intention to talk about my situation with others, including news reporters, and I had also waived my right to confidentiality by giving him permission to discuss my case if he wished. One of the other men on the court expressed the opinion that the publicity about disciplining scholars damaged the church and that I was opposing the church by talking to news reporters. I replied that my motive was not to damage the church but to call attention to some important issues that affected all church members. "If the publicity makes the church look bad," I argued, "maybe there is something bad about disciplining church members for the honest exploration of religious questions."

The next piece of evidence against me was a news article which appeared in *Sunstone* reporting the disciplinary action taken against me in October. This news article quoted extensively from the defense I had presented at the court and the open letter I had sent my bishop. My bishop thought that these documents criticized the church and its leaders and contained false doctrine.

My bishop also questioned me about my participation on a panel sponsored by the Mormon Alliance. Although he had no report of what I had said on the panel, he seemed to feel that my very participation constituted opposition to the church. I explained that the Mormon Alliance is not an apostate organization with the purpose to harm or embarrass the church in any way. Its purpose is to define and identify spiritual abuse, to educate members concerning their rights and to collect stories of spiritual abuse for the purpose of aiding the victims and calling attention to the problem.

My bishop maintained that the evidence he presented

showed that I repeatedly acted in clear, open and deliberate public opposition to the church or its leaders. I argued, however, that none of my speeches, writings or actions had been in opposition to the church or its leaders. To disagree with a person's ideas or to refuse to follow his advice is not necessarily to be in opposition to him, and to point out problems in an institution is not necessarily to be in opposition to that institution.

I told my bishop that in judging whether or not I was guilty of apostasy he had to take my motives into consideration. My motives had always been to share ideas that had been helpful to me, to increase my own and others' understanding of the gospel and religious truth and to help solve problems in accordance with gospel principles.

While my bishop admitted my motives were good and acknowledged my good character and service in the church, he also indicated that these were irrelevant to whether or not I was an apostate. He said that he had to look at the outcome of my actions. Although he had told me many times that my articles had damaged people's testimonies, I pointed out that he had never produced one witness against me. Indeed, there are many people who have told me that what I have written has helped them remain in the church.

My final plea to him for exoneration was: "Believing what you do about what it would mean to excommunicate me—that it would invalidate my baptismal covenant, that it would take away the sealing with my husband and children, that it would mean that I couldn't participate or serve in the church or be with my children at important times in their lives—believing all this, how could you do this to me? You know of

my belief in God and my desire and efforts to do what is right. How can you punish me in this way, just because you think I have broken these rules, these rules which are not from God but which you made up?"

The decision of the disciplinary council was that I be excommunicated for apostasy.

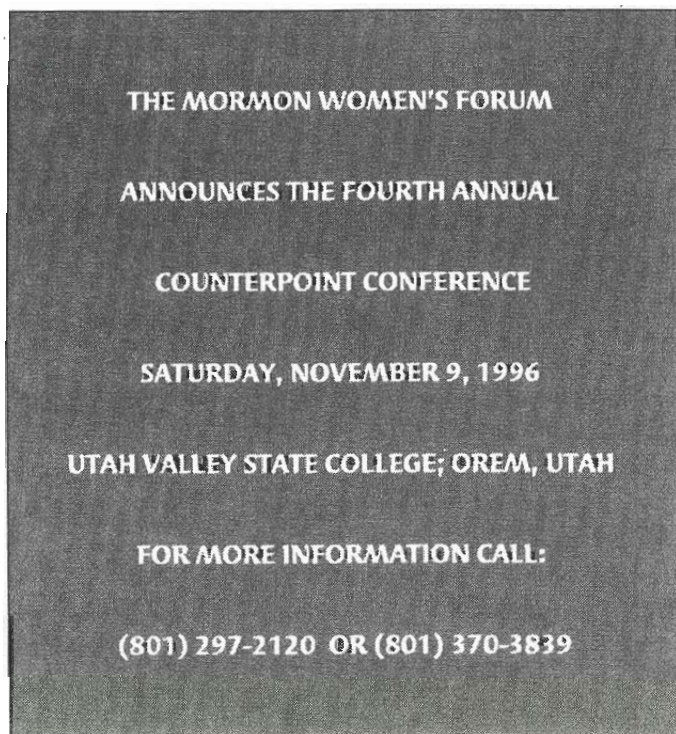
In the months between giving *Dialogue* permission to publish "Toward a Mormon Theology of God the Mother" and receiving the May 1994 phone call that informed me of my stake president's displeasure that I was publishing it, I often reflected on the possibility of losing my church membership and what this would mean to me. I discovered that what I feared and questioned most was how my being disciplined by the church would affect my family and friends and my relationships with them.

I knew that my relationship with God did not depend on my relationship with the church. God's love for me and my faith in Him/Her form the essence of my relationship with God. In my view ordinances are important because they substantiate this relationship and allow me to make covenants with God, but my primary connection to God is through the Holy Spirit. Since all ordinances must be ratified by the Holy Ghost to be efficacious, it seems reasonable that excommunication would also need to be ratified by the Spirit. I did not believe that my church leaders could cancel my covenants with Christ contrary to his will, but they certainly had the power to take away my membership in the church. Although I regard baptism as primarily a symbol of my faith in Jesus Christ, my acceptance of him as my Savior and my repentance of my sins, it is also an ordinance that makes me a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Because I did not believe my church leaders had the power to alter my relationship with God and because my relationship with God is more important to me than my relationship with the church, I could contemplate losing my membership if my leaders forced me to choose between obeying them and obeying God. This does not mean that I considered the possibility of losing my membership without any fears or sense of impending loss. I valued my membership and participation in the church community, not only because I had many positive experiences in the Mormon church, but also because I loved the people I had come to know through my membership in it.

I also believed and still feel that my relationship with God could not be separated from my relationship with other people. As a Christian I am called to be a member of the body of Christ, a community of believers. Because of my heritage, experiences, beliefs and commitment, I am part of the Mormon segment of the body of Christ. I decided to continue attending church no matter how my status in the church changed. I have done so, but it has been very difficult.

My personal relationships are almost exclusively with Mormons. Although I had nonmember friends in high



school, my college experience was at BYU, after which I married and lived in five different states with my husband and family. Because I have never worked outside the home and have had small children and a large family to care for, the church has been my principal means of forming friendships. We now live in Provo where almost everyone is a church member. My extended family and my husband's family are all faithful members of the church. I realized that the church is a factor in almost every personal relationship I have; if my relationship with the church changed, it would affect every one of these relationships. Being disciplined by the church could redefine every one of them.

Some questions that have engaged me with increasing passion over the last fifteen years, first intellectually and then spiritually and experientially, concern the meaning and practice of Christian community. How should we treat one another as Christians? What is the purpose of the church, and what is the nature of a true church of Christ? As I worked with my leaders to determine what my relationship with the church would be and as I renegotiated, redefined and developed anew my relationships with friends, acquaintances and family members, I tried to do it according to the understanding of Christian principles I had developed and the vision of the church that had quickened me even as I recognized the inadequacy of my understanding and the incompleteness of my vision.

Because my case was given wide coverage in the media and was discussed extensively in Mormon groups on the Internet and in informal settings throughout the area, I learned something of what it means to become a public figure, to be known by people I don't know. I found it somewhat unsettling to realize that when I went out in public I was at times recognized by people I didn't know who had opinions about me. I have discovered that the way my problems with the church have affected my relationships with people depends to a great extent on their own relationship to the church. The people who have offered me the most sympathy, support and understanding are generally those who ask questions freely and value critical thinking; often they see problems in the church or have experienced troubling aspects of the institutional church. Usually they already share my views about the importance of freedom of speech and independent scholarship or the priority of one's personal relationship with God to one's loyalty to the institution of the church. Often they are also concerned about women's status in the church and the problems of spiritual abuse and authoritarianism. They include those who have suffered spiritual abuse themselves or who have been marginalized in the church. These people are often associated with unofficial Mormon groups.

The relationships that I have found most problematic and most painful are with my church leaders and active, mainstream Mormons who find it difficult or impossible to

question anything about the church, people who believe that disagreement and dissent are somehow sinful and public disagreement and dissent are apostate. I have felt that these people's love and acceptance of me are conditioned on my support of their view of the church. With a few exceptions I have felt judged and rejected by these people even though in some cases they have told me that they love me and have attempted to continue our relationship. I acknowledge that these are my feelings and perhaps these people feel that they have shown me love and acceptance and that I have judged and rejected them.

I have defined two groups. Both groups include friends, family members, acquaintances and strangers. My definition may seem to draw a sharp demarcation between the two groups, but in reality, of course, no such rigid boundary exists. There are varying degrees of each characteristic, and individuals may fit into one group in some ways and the other group in others.

Is it possible that the acceptance, support and sympathy the first group gave me was simply based on our similarity of views? To some extent and in some cases I believe it was. I have also felt judgment and rejection from some people in the first group. Some of them have found my continued commitment to the church foolish, masochistic or sinful. They think I should stop going to church and abandon all hope of seeing the church become less authoritarian. Others have found me too idealistic or naive and believe that I should have somehow compromised and remained in the church. Others have said that I am too angry, too confrontive, too radical or too critical. Can we only love those we agree with?

My experiences in redefining my relationships have caused me to think deeply about the nature of unconditional love. One reason I have felt more support from nontraditional Mormons, I believe, is that this group has a commitment to free speech and a forum for exercising it in the many unofficial Mormon groups that exist. Discussion of problems in the church is accepted and expected. Unconditional love demands an open, honest dialogue in which the other's truth is sought and honored.

Although mainstream Mormons are taught the Christian values of charity, repentance and forgiveness and are exhorted not to judge one another, they are also taught in many ways that the General Authorities (and sometimes local leaders as well) always speak for God, that we should always obey them and that freedom of conscience and personal integrity are less important than obedience. Such teachings seriously undermine the flourishing of unconditional love. They foster a belief that perfection is required and impede the search for truth since doubt, disagreement and dissent cannot be expressed.

The thing that I have found most difficult in my relations with people in this group is their unwillingness to discuss

my changed status in the church. Although I would like to simply assume that I am loved and accepted, even though I have been judged unworthy by the church, I have discovered that this is often not the case. Perhaps this acceptance can only come through dialogue. Something of the magnitude of excommunication needs to be discussed. Can I be part of the church community if I have been excommunicated? If so, then what, exactly, is the meaning of excommunication? If not, then what, exactly, does my continued commitment to and activity in the church really mean?

In most of the cases where I have been able to discover how my excommunication has affected mainstream Mormons' perception of me, I have learned that they believe I deserved to be excommunicated. Often this is a judgment that recognizes only one thing about me: I am a dissenter, a critic of the church, a preacher of false doctrine, a proud person who refused to accept counsel, a rebel deserving of punishment. This means that I possess all the qualities such people are supposed to possess, even without supporting evidence and despite contradictory evidence. But the worst part of this kind of judgment is that it does not want to be changed; it does not want to learn more about me; it does not want to understand me, but only to judge me.

This hurts me deeply; it feels like a failure of love. I have told myself that it is certainly possible that someone could believe that I deserved to be excommunicated and still love and accept me, but then why don't I feel this love? I have reasoned that it is because love would require these people to try to understand why I made the choices I did and why I

was excommunicated. Such an undertaking would mean questioning many things about the church, and for mainstream Mormons this is just too difficult. Fear overcomes love.

I am determined to let the pain of this judgment remind me never to judge or reject others. Not judging and rejecting does not mean not forming any judgment about a person; it means not forming a final judgment but being open to others in their freedom, desiring to know and be known by them. Judgment assumes that what we know of a person is all she is, that our description of her captures her, that we can predict what she will do. Unconditional love requires us to grant the other person her freedom, her agency. This means more than simply allowing her to make choices. It means granting her subjectivity and recognizing the reality of her point of view.

Can we fearful, prejudiced, defensive, prideful human beings give unconditional love? Of course not. But is it possible that, transformed by God's unconditional love for us, we can with faith, openness, vulnerability and grace love one another as Christ loves us? Because of my faith in Christ, I believe that it is. I have felt his love, which is a love that cannot be contained within the self but must overflow and envelop others. I desire this love; I ponder it; I yearn for it; I will not be satisfied with anything less.

Editor's Note: *Allred's full account and interpretation of the church disciplinary proceedings against her will be published in the Mormon Alliance Case Reports series in 1996.*

Editor's Note: *The following letter appeared in The Salt Lake Tribune and the Provo Daily Herald in response to Janice Allred's excommunication.*

Letter to the editor:

Mormon women were sent a message loud and clear on May 9th when Janice Allred, mother of nine who has never worked outside of her home, was excommunicated. It is no longer necessary to obey God because obedience to our local church leaders is the highest law for us. We now know that it is not good enough for women to be active, believing members and to get married and have children. It is not good enough to stay at home with these children. Now we know we can not use the brains that God has given us.

Janice is someone who never turned down a calling, went to church every week with her children, even after being put on probation. Her daughter married in the temple and she has sent two sons on missions. She is one of the kindest women I have ever had the pleasure to know.

She also happens to be brilliant. This is the reason for

her excommunication: she writes brilliant scholarly papers. These papers are difficult to write and difficult to read. She has never discussed these things in any church setting but only at conferences and in periodicals where intellectual exploration is expected.

As the Mormon church continues to excommunicate good women like Janice Allred, perhaps it is time to stop longing for a return to the Victorian era, which never existed, the one the General Authorities continue to try to make us believe in: when Moms stayed home and all was well. Instead they should embrace their true brothers of the Middle Ages who went on a witch hunt throwing women in deep pools of water; if they could float it was proof enough they were witches. In fact, maybe when women come to the waters of baptism from now on, we could add one step: see if they float, then we can save all of us a lot of time and heartache.

Lynne Kanavel Whitesides
Salt Lake City, UT

Christian Feminist Gardening

LYNN MATTHEWS ANDERSON

THERE ARE ALL kinds of gardeners. Some don't like bugs. To them, anything that crawls or flies is viewed as dangerous and undesirable, so these gardeners tend to apply broad-spectrum, highly toxic pesticides to rid the garden of what they view as pests. The fact that good bugs get killed off along with bad increases the gardener's reliance on chemicals from season to season.

Some gardeners are aware that good bugs along with bad bugs will get killed by the broad-spectrum pesticides, but opt to use them anyway because it's easier, not so labor-intensive and seems to answer the immediate needs of the garden.

Some gardeners plant the same things over and over again, in the same spot, year after year. They know or care little about hybridization and the value of rotation. They don't know what kinds of seeds and varieties are available. They tend to overfertilize, pointing with pride to the flourishing, immense greenery—but refuse to see that the yield in actual fruit belies the appearance of growth. Ultimately they exhaust the soil, have lower yields, contaminate the water supply and increase the odds that blight or disease will wipe out the one or two crops they persist in planting.

There have likewise been unintentional and harmful consequences to using non-organic methods when tending Christ's garden. Employing harsh chemical treatments and injurious mechanized processes in the quest to force growth increases the risk of poisoning ourselves with the residues. Far too many people are refusing to eat of the tree of life because they fear it has been contaminated with the pesticide of

institutional coercion and pride. Worse, far too many people have partaken of the fruit of the tree of life, only to find the worm of unrighteous dominion nibbling away at the core.

Good, unharmed, natural gardening isn't easy. Many problems can be overcome when gardeners talk to other gardeners—even gardeners younger than they, whose plots may be smaller. Good master gardeners listen to others with more expertise than they in dealing with particular problems, pests or fertilizers. Good master gardeners listen to the questions and problems of less-experienced gardeners before attempting to give answers or advice.

Good gardeners study and develop new seeds and hybrids. They don't scorn advice but seek it. They recognize the value of innovative approaches, of crop diversity, of using good insects to counteract bad insects, of careful planting and cultivation of natural pest- and weed-controlling plants. They value methods based on real-life, contemporary experience, rather than slavishly following past routines solely because "that's the way we've always done it in this garden." They are willing to discard "traditional" methods which have demonstrably proven harmful. They don't simply assume that the Head Gardener approves of such methods simply because those methods have been around for awhile, or because they are described in back issues of "Good Gardening Tips" from long ago. Some of those past "tips" have been toxic in the extreme.

Good master gardeners do not condemn new ideas and methods out of hand, but wait to see the quality of the fruit and the yield. They do not restrict other gardeners' use of tools and natu-

ral fertilizers and new seeds nor access to the garden itself—saying to some, "you're a woman, you should be happy to plant tomatoes; and by the way, don't touch the hoe," or "you're a man, you need to concentrate on corn, and leave the tomatoes alone." Good master gardeners garden for the joy of it and allow other individuals the same opportunity for finding joy in their own fields of labor.

Good master gardeners take seriously Christ's maxim, "by their fruits ye shall know them," rather than allowing capriciousness, prejudice and cultural bias to dictate what or who gets pruned or plucked up—and when. Just as God restrains the angels from plucking up the tares until this can be done without harming the wheat, good gardeners understand how easy it is to mistake wheat for tares, and how important it is to show equal forbearance. Good gardeners understand from the parable in Jacob 5 that even wild branches are necessary to the life and productivity of a tame olive tree.

Like any garden, Christ's garden can truly thrive only when diversity is understood and respected. Using organic methods may take some getting used to. Initially the yield may be a bit lower without use of fertilizers and pesticides. (Careful weeding and mulching make herbicides unnecessary.) Sometimes organic produce must be washed a little more carefully to get rid of "little visitors," and sometimes it doesn't look quite so good as the slickly-waxed, commercially-grown stuff. But there's no comparing taste, healthfulness or overall quality of the fruit.

Those who blitz Christ's garden with the poison of intolerance for fear of letting a few bugs in or a few weeds grow will certainly have some explaining to do to the Head Gardener. Only tending His garden with care and kindness will elicit the "well done" we each hope to hear from the Head Gardener.

Book Review

Desert Quartet

by

TERRY TEMPEST WILLIAMS

New York: Pantheon Books, 1995

Reviewed by

CECILIA KONCHAR FARR

JUST BEFORE Thanksgiving my husband packed our two kids into my Geo Metro and headed off on a 17-hour drive to Pittsburgh. His grandmother was dying, and he thought it best to say goodbye when she could still hear it. It was a good trip. He blessed her (which blessed him), and she lived another week to spend Thanksgiving with the Farris. Turned out Tracy's timing was good, since this faithful temple-worker, returned missionary grandma of his insisted there would be no funeral and that she would be cremated, her ashes returned to San Diego where she had lived most of her feisty life. So there was no need for the obligatory family gathering when she left them a few days after Tracy and the kids had returned to Minnesota.

November found me in the heaviest part of a difficult semester of teaching in the English Department of my small women's college in St. Paul. As I waved goodbye to my family, I planned to hole up in my office, grading and reading (and playing on the Internet) until they returned in six days. Snow had fallen here on Halloween and had been accumulating ever since. Since winter temperatures seldom rise above freezing, our snow doesn't go away until April or May. Which is to say, I was not eager to go out, nor was I eager to drive anywhere but the 1.2 miles to my college and back or a few blocks away from there to my favorite coffee shops and bookstores. I was going to revel in

a solitude I have cherished all my hectic life—a solitude that being a sibling of seven and, later, a mother of two has made a rare gift.

And here was the crowning glory of my six-day retreat: Terry Tempest Williams was scheduled to read from *Desert Quartet* at my local (independent) bookstore at the end of my first day of solitude. Perfect. She would evoke Utah deserts and that vast aloneness I love when I mountain bike. Bundled up against the Minnesota winter, I would be transported to the places on earth which, for reasons I can't comprehend, touch my Pennsylvanian's soul in ways even my beloved forests never have.

And that's exactly what she did. So when I offer you this review of *Desert Quartet*, I offer it in this context, with no pretense of objectivity or intellectual distance. Picture a room full of Minnesotans (i.e. Lutherans and Catholics) swathed in wool and Polartech, watching the snow fall outside as they wander Mormon Country within—and me among them, a born-and-raised Easterner who never did get the hang of living in Utah, feeling at home in my self as I turned to the desert for strength. My six-day retreat was ideal—introspective and invigorating, just what I needed—and *Desert Quartet* was the perfect background music for it.

Desert Quartet is a little book, not so visually striking as *Coyote's Canyon*, not so wide-ranging as *An Unspoken*

Hunger, nor as philosophical as *Refuge*. But it is a dense book, as if all of Terry's other books were concentrated here. It turns a magnifying glass on the theme that weaves through all her works—the author's relationship with the land. So intense is the concentration of attention on that relationship that the landscape seems on fire from the very first phrase: "Earth. Rock. Desert, I am walking barefoot on sandstone, flesh responding to flesh. It is hot, so hot the rock threatens to burn through the calloused souls of my feet." Ah, but this is only the beginning. The intensity mounts throughout, and, dare I suggest it?, it speaks to me as a sexual woman.

In a culture where female sexuality is connected with shame and sin, where porn and sex workers, centerfolds and models are responsive to and in service of men's desires, this lyric essay (subtitled "An Erotic Landscape") stages a revolution, portraying women as in control of our own desires, not the object of someone else's. Reading it, we revel in our own bodies and the pleasures they allow us. We revel, and no one watches. It is for us.

Having been, with many of you, raised in the pastel shadows of the brides' dressing rooms of Good Mormon Womanhood, I found this passage especially insightful: "What I fear and desire most in this world is passion. I fear it because it promises to be spontaneous, out of my control, unnamed, beyond my reasonable self. I desire it because passion has color, like the landscape before me. It is not pale. It is not neutral. It reveals the backside of the heart." Terry addresses a passion most of us were taught never to acknowledge, a creative passion that was directed only toward creation. It has been our secret, and here in the desert we are invited to speak it and acknowledge its power.

This four-part exploration of the erotic landscape of Southern Utah and of women's desires is accompanied by black and white sketches and full-color

glossies of the themes—Earth, Water, Fire and Air. These minimalist, suggestive illustrations by Mary Frank, Terry’s artist/collaborator, are in perfect harmony with the density of the text. They invite us to fill in with what we know, what we have felt and seen. We complete the landscapes with our desires, our passions, our bodies.

And our relationships. Because as anyone who has heard Terry read knows, her books are communal experiences, across generations, cultures and time. I can’t read them now with-

out hearing her voice invoking her cousins, mother, grandmothers and partner, Brooke, and without hearing her speak directly to me, inviting me to know her. Her generosity and her arresting spirituality echo in the richness of that voice, and I hear it as I read *Desert Quartet*.

But more than knowing her, Terry’s books invite me to know me, from different angles and at different levels than I am used to seeing. Didn’t someone once say that that is the gift of the desert for an Easterner?: a new angle, a more

profound depth. It is always foreign so we are constantly awestruck, seeing everything for the first time. I think Tracy’s grandmother, a child of the Utah desert herself (and, if old home-movies don’t lie, a defiant and sexual woman), would be happy to know of the gifts I received that November night as she was dying. This book review gives me a chance to pass those gifts on to you—from the frigid North to wherever you are—from me, Grandma Tracy and Terry Tempest Williams.

Skinnydipping on the Internet

HEATHER SUNDAHL

Editor’s Note: *The following was excerpted from a panel on electronic discussion groups presented at the 1995 Sunstone Symposium.*

SKINNYDIPPING IS a recurrent theme on LDS-Women, a Mormon feminist discussion group on the Internet. In the years I have been on this electronic list, I have seen it brought up at least every couple months, though it may take on a slightly different form like streaking or dancing naked around a bon fire. Skinnydipping seems an appropriate metaphor for what we do on the list, since most of us have shed our conservative clothing and swim in waters that many think dangerous and “best left uncharted.” Our refusal to wear appropriate swim wear makes us at once daring and vulnerable. Some may judge us, saying that we defy tradition and the party line in order to shock, but for most of us, the clothes were just too tight and cut into our flesh. Our clothes are not shed out of defiance but necessity. We skinnydip because we must.

LDS-Women is a true feminist oasis. It is our cyber-Relief Society. Only the initials “RS” do not stand for relief society, but “real sharing.” This is what LDS-Women is all about—sharing, or as Carlan Bradshaw so eloquently puts it, “telling the truth of our lives.” To get back to my skinnydipping analogy, it is on LDS-Women that we truly strip down and bear it all.

On this list, we talk about anything and everything. We tell jokes (“Why are dumb blond jokes all one liners? So men can remember them.”); we vent (and nobody tries to fix whatever annoyed you since we all know that the purpose of venting is to find understanding, not advice); we compare girls’ camp stories and brainstorm about empowering the church’s current young women; we talk about prayer, the church and the nature of divinity and respect the range of beliefs and practices presented. LDS-Women does not require a consensus, but revels in the uniqueness of each woman’s spirituality, sexuality and personal experiences.

One of my favorite threads focused

on our bodies. The premise of this thread began as “this is what I look like.” (When you spend so much time “reading” a certain person, you get quite curious.) But quickly the physical descriptions became a jumping off point for who we really are, and in what ways our bodies do and don’t reflect our souls. We read about one woman’s bee tattoo and how for her it symbolizes a connection to the Greek goddess Melissa. We read about one woman’s obsession with flamboyant shoes that reflect her creativity and boldness. At times we complained about flabby knees, adult acne and varicose veins. But in the telling most of us found things to admire and even celebrate: legs that let us run five miles a day, hips that make a statement when we dance, eyes that sparkle when we smile. When we read how others described us, we realized we are often blind to our own beauty and grace.

Let me share with you part of my favorite body post, which reveals one woman’s relationship between father and daughter, body and soul, exterior and interior. This is from Diane Brown.

Ever since the “body stories” thread began, I have thought about, well, my body. I’ve read with interest the ways

many of you describe yourselves; I've been most interested in the stories behind the telling. The "my sister says that . . ." or "my husband thinks my waist is . . ." lines. So I thought about me and how I feel about my body, then I tried to separate those feelings from what I've been told about my body—the parts men comment on, the parts women comment on (often not the same), the parts I hate, the parts I don't, the parts that have been hurt, the stories behind some of the scars. I found that I couldn't make very clear distinctions.

Too many voices have told me too many things, from my grandma telling me I was "husky" when I was ten (I cried) to men in the Middle East telling me I was a beautiful American, worth many, many camels. In all the spinning, I came up with more stories than description. But, at the risk of doing that self-indulgence thing, I thought I'd write about my hair, which means I'm really writing about my dad.

My hair, which for all of my life was short and neat and no nonsense, is

now long (halfway down my back), thick, naturally curly, dark brown. It is neither that long, nor that pretty, but it is the part of me I like.

When I was little I always had short hair—it was called a "pixie cut" back then. My mom is a no-nonsense, no-frills woman and I don't have sisters, so I was sort of clueless about hair. It was just always short. In third grade, I wanted to grow it. I started to grow it out, and my dad started coming up to me and quietly whispering in my ear, "I like short hair. I like short hair." I kept growing it, but wondered if I were doing something wrong, because this daily ritual of my dad whispering about my hair started to haunt me. So about a year later, when my hair was about shoulder length, my mom suggested I cut my hair for Father's Day. We went down to ZCMI, and I had it all cut off. Back to the pixie thing. Just short, looked-like-a-boy, simple hair. My mom had just bought a new plastic garbage can, so we went in the garage, brought the garbage can out, I hopped in it and rang the bell. When my dad answered

the door, I popped out and said "Happy Father's Day" with my new haircut.

My dad still talks about it as the best Father's Day gift ever.

So I always had short hair. Somehow I just assumed I had to have short hair, like there was no other choice. One day I was watching my best friend put her hair back and tie it in a scarf and I told her how jealous I was. She said "grow yours out." I told her I couldn't, that I was just a short hair kinda gal. But something broke that day. Somehow I figured out that I could have long hair. So I started to grow it, survived the awful growing out stages. Then the stories with my dad started again. Except I was 26, not eight. He actually began to whisper in my ear again, which just gave me the creeps. The night before I moved to Boston, I knew he would offer to give me a father's blessing. I DID NOT WANT ONE, didn't want him touching me, didn't want to hear his "church voice," didn't want it. But he came and asked me if he could give me

NETWORKING

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a blessing and I just sort of nodded, grit my teeth and decided I could live through it. I had on a baseball cap, which he made me take off (God hates baseball?). My hair fell loose around my shoulders and he said something involving "mop head" and "zulu warrior." I tuned the rest out.

A year ago I was in Utah for Christmas. By then, my hair was past any awkward growing-out phases. It was long, and I usually wore it pulled back. People commented on it. Especially people in Utah because they hadn't seen me in so long. Often I was asked why I hadn't ever grown it out before. I was really depressed, going through a tough time for many reasons. I was dreading coming back to Boston—cold, long winter and four term papers waiting, along with an apartment I hated. When it was just about time for me to go to the airport, I started to cry. I'm not quite sure why, because I really wasn't sad to leave my parents, just ambivalent about heading back to the pressures of school. I had five minutes. My dad said he wanted to talk to me. He said, "I know you're depressed and I just want to tell you something as your father. I am sure you would feel so much happier if you went and got your hair cut. Your hair is so unattractive. Really. It is the hair of a depressed person."

Well, let's just say that that one did it. I am in this long-hair thing for the duration. I still look in the mirror sometimes and don't recognize myself. I show people pictures of me with short hair and they don't recognize me. I still think I don't quite know what I'm doing. I still dream of having a big sister to show me how to fix my hair, or a dad who thought my thick, dark hair was pretty. I go out with men who touch my hair and tell me to take it out of a pony tail and I have a hard time believing that they like it long. (Not that I do my hair for what men may or may not say, but I guess I just assumed all men were somehow, deep down like my fa-

ther. They're not. Thank God.) My hair is long because that's how I like it. I like how it looks and I like how it feels. I like walking in the wind and having it blow in my face. I like buying scarves and all kinds of hair doo-dahs. I like the whole deal.

Thanks for letting me share. I think about that little nine-year-old kid jumping out of a garbage can after a haircut. I think about all that kid was going through that was big and scary (sad stories for another day . . .). I think about my mom encouraging me to cut my hair and getting out a garbage can of all things. I think about all that and I'm pretty sure that being grown up is a better, safer place. Long hair and all.

Love, Diane

I think half of us cried when we read that post. It spoke so much pain of the body. How every inch of us tells a story, every scar, every bulge, every hair. Though much pain was shared, in the sharing came a release. In fact, many of the women spoke of finding a new joy in their bodies after that thread. One woman wrote about how she loved to dance when she was a teenager, but had stopped. She recently had a baby and no longer felt at home in her body. She felt like she couldn't abandon herself to the music because she was too self-conscious. (Is it any wonder she feels this way in a culture that would have us believe that only size five women with big breasts have a right to enjoy their bodies?) But after reading all these posts where each body was appreciated, something changed for her. She wrote of stripping down, cranking up the CD player and dancing, dancing, dancing. Her joy was palpable, and we all felt her beauty.

For me, this captures what happens on the list. We put aside our coverings and bear our souls, cry with each other over our scars and bathe in the grace of ourselves and all women everywhere.

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Friday, August 16, 11:15 - 12:45

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