ARTICLE

On Poetic Flesh, Proximity, and Big Foot

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In 1855, in his preface to *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman penned an incantatory vision of the role of a great poet. Years later, perhaps sometime in the early 2000s, someone gifted my father a giant mahogany frame containing a fragment of Whitman's preface. In this fragment, Whitman instructs us that "this is what [we] shall do":

> *Love the earth and sun and the animals, despise riches, give alms to every one that asks, stand up for the stupid and crazy, devote your income and labor to others, hate tyrants, argue not concerning God, have patience and indulgence toward the people, take off your hat to nothing known or unknown or to any man or number of men, go freely with powerful uneducated persons and with the young and with the mothers of families, read these leaves in the open air every season of every year of your life, re-examine all you have been told at school or church or in any book, dismiss whatever insults your own soul, and your very flesh shall be a great poem* (747).

This little slice of inspiration has loomed over family conversations in my parents' living room for years, from my mother's midnight lectures about the nature of God, to my father's musings about Big Foot's identity as an interdimensional being who escapes detection by passing through wormholes. Whitman says to "dismiss whatever insults your own soul" (747), and in time this directive morphed into a family motto of sorts. The inverse was also true, that we should *embrace* whatever delighted our souls, and thus the reality of Big Foot was, if we wanted it to be, as true as any gospel precept.

I was raised by Mormon academics. Great literature and the philosophies of men were a somewhat natural part of my spiritual upbringing and emotional development. I rarely chafed at secular ideas that challenged my religious belief system because, like Whitman, I was taught to believe that I could "contain multitudes" (*Song of Myself*, 51). When my parents announced to their two teenage children that an unexpected but long-awaited younger sibling would be joining the family, they shifted between Church doctrine about the pre-existence and passages from Tennyson's "The Lady of Shallot." When I left on a mission to Montreal, I surreptitiously tucked a copy of Louise Glück's *The Wild Iris* into my suitcase next to my Book of Mormon. And when a cousin dogged my mother about Keats's lack of understanding of the Restored Gospel after her class lecture on "negative capability," she simply responded that maybe my cousin should have a little more of it.

Yet in truth, the enchantments of my academic world began to speak to my soul more than my concept of religion. This was no failing of my parents, or my professors and church leaders, or even my crusty old neighbor who often puttered over to save my soul when my boyfriend stayed at my house past midnight. Perhaps I could place the blame on Walt Whitman, who simply told me to dismiss whatever insulted my soul. And if anything insulted my soul, it

was my idea of religion. When I say "religion," I include a qualifier that I know is familiar to some, which is to say that it is the institution and culture that often feel prickly to me. Growing up in Provo, Utah while fueled by a lethal combination of Keats, *The Feminine Mystique*, and Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* made me an incredibly outspoken and insufferable critic of the Church from a young age. I frequently gave long sermons to patient young women's leaders about the rampant sexism in the Church's Personal Progress program. I left EFY three days early after being asked to change a blouse that showed a miniscule amount of cleavage, throwing middle fingers in the air on my way out the door. I chafed at the Book of Mormon because Nephi was a "bro," and the stories didn't have enough *eros*—whatever *that* meant. I probably even served a mission out of boredom, or, to put it more nobly, to find my own Edward Cullen on the mean streets of Montreal.

While my "dismiss-whatever-insults-your-soul" mindset transformed me into a passionate justice freak, more often than not I was just obnoxious and dismissive—a performative little gremlin. This attitude only grew worse as I became more boldly and naively enmeshed in my scholarly world. I was a constant critic of my faith community, but in the least productive ways, always more interested in performativity rather than simply performing what I professed to believe. While I believe that the Church can and does do very real harm when it fails to root out its ethos of intolerance, unlike well-meaning critics, I was mostly drawn to the feeling of elitism in my critiques, smug around my less "enlightened" friends, neighbors, and fellow congregants.

This is not to say that I am not simultaneously a spiritual person, but I am frequently caught up in the game of pointing out others' religious hypocrisy without deeply examining my own. When I arrived in Baltimore at Johns Hopkins for my PhD, my peers and I thrived on a similar type of sanctimony. It was all too easy to call out injustice over email, perform dizzying Marxist critiques that somehow always produced the same argument, and even ostracize classmates who wouldn't sign our highly polemical petitions. Soon my ire directed itself at my church membership, and for a time I convinced myself that my entire religious identity was at odds with the academic persona I was carefully cultivating. Like many of my Latter-day Saint peers, I felt called to join the great exodus and free myself from the "stain" of Mormonism.

In Simone Weil's *Waiting for God*, she writes that "one can never wrestle enough with God if one does so out of pure regard for the truth" (15). Despite my best efforts to strip away the façade of my beliefs in search of capital "T" Truth, I frequently found myself pulled back by a propensity for mysticism that I can never, and perhaps do not want to shake. Weil profoundly remarks that Christ "likes us to prefer truth to him because, before being Christ, he is truth. If one turns aside from him to go toward the truth, one will not go far before falling into his arms" (15). In spite of my best efforts to prod at and dissect my spiritual worldview in favor of "Truth," I very inconveniently found myself falling back into Christ's arms.

Or more concretely, perhaps it was really just my husband Roland's love of expensive and heavy Moroccan patio furniture that saved our souls. When my comrades at Hopkins were unable to help us move our latest acquisition up the three flights of narrow stairs in our Baltimore rowhome, like any defunct Mormon couple would do, we called the missionaries. Within two weeks Roland was the Ward Mission Leader of the Baltimore Inner Harbor ward.

Baltimore's Inner Harbor ward is a profoundly beautiful and challenging congregation. I quickly discovered that there is absolutely no room there for my ego and edicts because people's basic needs are often not met. Members of our ward frequently face evictions, slumlords cut off power and water for weeks, and many face the fear of either themselves or loved ones falling prey to the vicious cycle of addiction and abuse. In my rush to disabuse myself of what I assumed was a "problematic" church community, I had completely missed the memo of Whitman's first instruction, which, in a nutshell, tells us to "have patience and indulgence toward the people" (747).

This patience and indulgence toward people does not come as easily as experiencing a satisfying novel, poem, or work of moving art. Nor, quite frankly, does it come as naturally as writing a long-winded essay on Marx's *Das Capital.* Instead, patience and indulgence look like calling a slumlord multiple times a day to resolve a new convert's power failure. It looks like driving a homebound, disabled man to Church every Sunday even when he is unable to wash himself, and his clothes smell bad, through no fault of his own but the system that has failed him. It looks like finding housing for a family of nine facing eviction. More often than not it looks like comforting those that stand in need of comfort (Mosiah 18:9, Book of Mormon) before it looks like one of my hollow sermons from the Ivory Tower. Bryan Stevenson, author of *Just Mercy* and founder of the Equal Justice Initiative, insists that in order to see true social change, we must first strive for actual proximity to those who live on the margins of society. What my church community in Baltimore offers is endless opportunities to experience the power of proximity. I find myself constantly stunned, overwhelmed, and humbled by the deep well of need I have witnessed in this small corner of the city. Wrapped up in the comfort of my ideas and pronouncements, I never could have fathomed what suffering was happening outside my own doors.

This is not to say that my academic work is not incredibly meaningful and transformative. And I would be the last to say that the enterprise of the Humanities fails to address the very real social ills that we collectively face today. But I have grown tired of hiding behind the safe and comforting façade of professed allegiance to values that I am only willing to wield as proof of membership in some self-important club. The life of the mind can be a beautiful and empowering thing, but as academics it is easy to fall prey to armchair philosophizing, to the headiness of critique as a ritual of sanctimony rather than sanctification. In my search for Truth in the messy, painful, beautiful faith heritage I have inherited, more often than not I find myself hurling my body into Christ's arms. And for now, that is enough. It has to be enough.

I have certainly indulged *myself* long enough. Perhaps what my Mormon community offers me is a chance to practice what I preach, and for now, that is why I continue to embrace a peculiar and even problematic institution in my own journey as a scholar of faith. I know that church communities are not safe spaces for everyone, and too often they fail to become the places of refuge, love, and acceptance that they are supposed to be. Every day I weigh in the balance my desire to leave the institution of Mormonism behind, knowing that it will probably never change in the ways I desperately want it to, and my desire to commune and abide with people that I would probably never have the privilege of knowing and loving and serving if I shunned my faith completely.

For now, I can only hope that whatever road I take, I will always be mindful of Whitman's preface. He would remind me that I should first "give alms to every one that asks, stand up for the stupid and crazy, devote. . .income and labor to others, hate tyrants," and, above all else, "have patience and indulgence toward the people" (747). Then, and only then, might my flesh become a "great poem and have the richest fluency not only in its words but in the silent lines of its lips and face and between the lashes of [my] eyes and in every motion and joint of [my] bod[y]" (747).

Works Cited

Weil, Simon. *Waiting for God*. Routledge Classics, 2021.

Whitman, Walt. *The Complete Poems*. "Leaves of Grass, 1855." Edited by Francis Murphy, Penguin Classics, 2004.