

FROM THE EDITOR

BREAKS IN THE SKY

By Dan Wotherspoon



*Shadow and shade mix together at dawn.
But by the time you catch them simplicity's gone.
So we sort through the pieces my friends and I,
Searching through the darkness to find the breaks in the sky.*

—From “HERO” by DAVID CROSBY and PHIL COLLINS

I THINK ABOUT spiritual growth—a lot. It’s on my mind most of the time. I read about it more than any other subject. Quiz me on the developmental matrices of all the theorists, and I’ll wow you. Yet for all my thinking and reading about spiritual growth, I really know next to nothing about it.

My words reveal why: I’m a headcase. For most of my life, my approach to spiritual development, like my approach to almost everything else, has been primarily cerebral: I tend to enter headfirst, with the rest of me getting dragged into the fray only to whatever degree is absolutely necessary.

I like my head. My mind is strong. It’s fast. Ideas track well. My brain has taken me to fascinating places, allowing me to peek into many different worlds. My smarts have brought me recognition from time to time. My wits have kept my life operating on a relatively even keel. But even though I’m grateful for the blessing of a good mind, I know that I am not my brain. And life has been showing me that a lot lately.

For some time now, I’ve felt a tremendous longing for greater spirituality, deeper connection with others, more intimate communion with God. I’ve been called to dive much deeper into the scriptures and to become more disciplined in my spiritual practices and devotions. For a long time, I’ve related perfectly to the lyrics quoted above—I’ve sifted through shadow and shade in a search for simplicity. And when I’ve acted, I have been rewarded with joys and insights—“breaks in the sky”—and encouragement from deep within me to keep going, to take an even deeper dive, a full plunge.

And things go well for a while. But then I hesitate. I find an excuse to skip my practice that day, and then the next. And then I start

kicking myself for being such a weakling. I want to think the interruptions represent only one step back—a moment to regroup and stabilize after the two forward steps I just took. But I don’t know. Am I afraid of something?

AS soon as I could after taking this post at Sunstone, I invited James Fowler to give a workshop and speak at our Salt Lake symposium. He’s the author of *Stages of Faith* and several other books that led me to all my other reading about faith and spiritual growth. During a break in the workshop Dr. Fowler was leading, my friend Tom Kimball asked what he could do to come to really trust that what Fowler had described as the next stage of faith development was something real and that people weren’t just claiming spiritual growth based upon expectations they had grown up with. For some time, Tom had been concerned that he never seemed to have anything close to the kind of spiritual experiences many around him claimed for themselves. So why should he trust if anything they were saying is real?

Fowler’s answer caught Tom by surprise. He asked if Tom were praying or engaged in some kind of spiritual practice. When Tom answered that, at that time, he wasn’t, Fowler replied something along the lines of: *If you’re not standing in the tracks, how do you expect to get hit by the train?* In short, he recommended that Tom begin to perform the practices that put someone in a position to experience his or her spirit.

TOM’S predicament and Fowler’s answer remind me of the dilemma at the crux of William James’s classic

essay, “The Will to Believe.” In it, James responds to an argument put forth by William Clifford that “it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.” Clifford isn’t arguing against belief itself so much as calling us, as rational beings, to make sure that *before we act on our beliefs*, we have acquired them by patient investigation, not simply through stifling our doubts. We shouldn’t jump before we’re convinced what the result will be.¹

James recognizes that Clifford has a point: that it is important to avoid making mistakes. James formulates the “first and great commandments of would-be knowers” as: “we must know the truth; and we must avoid error.” He continues:

“Believe truth!” “Shun error!”—these . . . are two materially different laws; and by choosing between them we may color differently our whole intellectual life. We may regard the chase for truth as paramount, and the avoidance of error as secondary; or we may . . . treat the avoidance of error as more imperative, and let truth take its chance.

In the end, James believes the chase for truth should outweigh our fear of, in his words, “being duped.” He votes against Clifford’s approach:

Our errors are surely not such awfully solemn things. In a world where we are so certain to incur them in spite of all our caution, a certain lightness of heart seems healthier than this excessive nervousness on their behalf.

James honors skepticism to a point, recognizing that we truly don’t have an “infallible intellect” that can give us “its solving word.” But if we have come to recognize “that no bell in us tolls to let us know for certain when truth is in our grasp,” then it “seems a piece of idle fantasticality to preach so solemnly our duty of waiting for the bell.” In somewhat the same spirit as Fowler’s answer to Tom, James points out: “We may wait if we will; but we do so at our own peril, as much as if we believed. In *either case we act*, taking our life in our hands.”² Whether we choose to stand on the train tracks or not, we are choosing.

BUT what are we choosing *into* when we decide to undertake deeper spiritual practice? Jonah received a “call” and was afraid and ran. But it was a call he could only run from for so long. Depressed, in the belly of the whale—“the belly of

hell”—Jonah, like Alma the Younger, “remembered the Lord,” called out, and was delivered (Jonah 1–2; Alma 36:6–24).

My good friend Marylee Mitcham (who has a letter to the editor in this issue) says she knows she’s received a call

because I experience the grace that flows from my struggle to answer that call. Grace flows when I agree to struggle with it at some unspecified future time. Grace even flows when I simply think about trying. Whatever small amount of consent I offer, I am generously rewarded.

What she describes sounds wonderful! I’m in! But wait. She continues:

the struggle itself is never consoling; it always feels hard and lonely and beyond me. I could say it this way: my consent feels like leaving home; God’s grace feels like coming home; the struggle to be faithful to a call feels like being outside in the weather.³

Is that what I’m afraid of? *Weather?*

I’M excited about Phil McLemore’s cover essay in this issue. Phil and I have been friends for seven or eight years, and, as you’ll read, he’s been obsessed with spiritual growth even more than I have. For thirty years as a Church Education System employee and chaplain, he was driven by a desire to be more Christlike, to experience a genuine transformation in his character, only to keep hitting up against what felt like a brick wall. I’ll let Phil tell his own story, but he ultimately found his way through that wall—yet not through any means he’d previously imagined. In his journey, he’s found keys for understanding why it is that we all struggle when it comes to genuine spiritual transformation. He’s also found practices that have worked for him and quietly testifies that when living in your spirit, even “weather” feels okay—exciting even. Regardless of whether you’re a headcase like me or not, I trust you’ll enjoy learning from him just as I have. ☺

NOTES

1. William K. Clifford, “The Ethics of Belief” (1877); accessed 5 May 2006 at http://www.infidels.org/library/historical/w_k_clifford/ethics_of_belief.html.
2. William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Dover, 1956), 1–31 (emphases in original).
3. Marylee Mitcham, *An Accidental Monk: Her Domestic Search for God* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1976), 9.

SPRING SYMPOSIUMING

OUR GREAT THANKS to everyone who helped organize or who attended the 2006 Dallas and Sunstone West symposiums! The Dallas symposium was held 18 March in the home of DARYL and STEVE ECCLES, where forty-some attendees were treated to presentations on subjects ranging from the way Latter-day Saints differ from others in many cultures in our view of prophets to a creative exploration of sin and guilt in the story of Cain.

Sunstone West was co-sponsored by the Claremont Graduate University School of Religion and held 21–22 April on the CGU campus, drawing nearly one hundred attendees. Symposium co-organizers JOHN and JANA REMY were wonderful on-the-scene resource people, before, during, and after the event, and we are also very grateful for the campus support of CGU’s dean of religion, KAREN JO TORJESEN, and her assistant, LISA MALDONADO.

Audio recordings from both symposiums are available through Sunstoneonline.com.



Dallas hosts Daryl and Steve Eccles



CGU dean of religion Karen Jo Torjesen



Sunstone board chair Mike Stevens



A portion of the Dallas audience gets ready for another session to begin



Sunstone West crowd in Claremont Graduate University’s Albrecht Auditorium



At Sunstone West, John Williams explores LDS connections with Alfred Hitchcock films