

WOODWARD GALLERY

30th Anniversary | 1994-2024 | NYC

Margaret Morrison | Paradigm Shift

As a fifth generation Mormon, I grew up hearing faith promoting stories of my pioneer ancestors who left behind all they had to build a new Zion in the wilderness of the American West. My maternal great great-grandparents sailed from Liverpool, England in 1853, to New Orleans, took a river boat up the Mississippi River to Iowa, where they gathered supplies for the overland journey. Like the other new immigrants in their wagon company, they saw themselves as the latter-day house of Israel, following their own Moses, Brigham Young, to the promised land; fervently believing that God required this sacrifice to build a strong people devoted to the faith.

For weeks, they made their way in an ox drawn wagon across the Plains before dropping down into to the Great Salt Lake Valley which was nothing but a barren desert. I try to imagine their shock at trading the verdant landscape of England for a formidable desert ringed by the rugged Wasatch Mountains on the east and a dead salty lake to the west.

With such a heritage of self-sacrifice, it's perhaps easier to understand how members could commit their entire lives to the Mormon faith with its strict dietary laws and modesty codes. For many, adherence to these outward manifestations of obedience demonstrated commitment to the Church "tribe" and telegraphed a level of "righteousness" for all to see. I was taught to revere the founder of the faith as a virtuous, nearly perfect man, hand-picked by God, Himself, in the latter days. The only thing I found unsettling was the Church's former practice of polygamy that formally ended with the 1890 Manifesto. I was assured that it was for the building up of the kingdom, to raise a righteous seed, and that God's ways were not our ways. This foundational narrative was constructed to promote faithfulness to the institution and to God. If there was any aspect of our history or practice that gave me consternation, I placed it on my metaphorical shelf to deal with later.

Then everything changed. In the early 2000s, an enormous treasure trove of historical documents, letters, and journals from Mormon history flooded the internet. (Paradoxically, Mormons have always been tremendous record keepers, filing away every scrap of writing and every syllable uttered by past leaders.) The Church could no longer be the gatekeeper, hiding away the unsavory and salacious moments in its history. As I voraciously read everything that I could get my hands on, I realized that the tidy "Faithful Narrative" that I had been raised to believe was a glossy fabrication. The real history was raw, messy; filled with debauchery and sexual intrigue. My "shelf" was shattered, and my faith was in ruins. In the past everything had been right or wrong, good or evil, black or white. What do I do now? Should I walk away like so many others were doing? I was exhausted physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

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During this tumultuous time, I happened upon James Fowler's theory of the Stages of Faith Development, and it resonated deeply with me. Fowler likened an individual's faith progression to a child's relationship with his parents. The very young child reveres his parents as near perfect beings, imbuing them with a "god-like" status. As this child matures into adolescence, he begins to discern that his parents are far from perfect; a disappointing realization that often leads to anger and rebellion. Eventually the child reaches adulthood and begins to form a new a relationship; one that acknowledges his parents' weaknesses while recognizing and sometimes celebrating their strengths. I found Fowler's theory to be truly illuminating. Through this newfound lens, I began to see where I was on my own path of faith, no longer fearful of the destination.

Like the young adult, I began to pull away from my fury and frustration to make room for a new paradigm that allowed for more nuanced thinking. I was confronted with the reality that a "perfect" church could not exist, that the leaders that I had grown up revering as God's oracles were flawed and very human. With this new vantage point, I no longer felt the pressure to outwardly conform to the institution. Instead, I turned inward and rekindled a deeper, more personal spirituality. I sifted through the ruins of my faith tradition and found the pieces that resonated with me and discarded what didn't. At last, I could shed the debilitating millstone of polygamy. As I rebuilt, I began to experience deeper connections with the Divine, a true sense of transcendence. I abandoned the black and white thinking of my early years, and learned to navigate along the borderland, interacting with both the "true believers" and the disillusioned members alike. For me, the Mormon Church is no longer the arbiter or authority between me and heaven. Instead, it is a vehicle that helps me toward my destination, oneness with God.

My Paradigm Shift Series springs from the devastating sense of loss I felt when my belief in the "faith promoting" history of the Mormon church imploded, forcing me to build a new, and infinitely deeper spiritual foundation. The overarching narrative of the paintings traces the arc of my journey from cataclysmic destruction and terrible sadness to the reclamation of my inner peace and eventual reconnection with my Mormon tribe. I see myself in conversation with some of the "Brethren" from the middle of the 20th century who were responsible for constructing the "Faithful Narrative."

https://issuu.com/woodwardgallery/docs/margaret_morrison_paradigm_shift_catalogue

Doubt: The drumbeat was constant...don't read anti-Mormon literature. They said it is evil and will destroy my faith. Stay safely tucked within the windowless house and don't even think about lifting the blinds to see what might be outside. But what if I'm compelled to look, what if this house is not exactly what they are telling me. There is light coming in from a crack in the wall. With that tiny bit of light, I can see that something's broken.

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Outside the Walls: Like Plato's cave, I opened the door and walked outside. In the full light of day, I saw that what they were telling me was wrong. Anti-Mormon literature is not a diabolical tool to destroy my faith, it is our history, raw and unvarnished. The incessant drumbeat has stopped now, too many people know. But the true believers who tenaciously guard the house still find us dangerous. Those of us who know are outside the walls, and those walls seem impenetrable like a medieval fortress town.

Followers: No one must know that I am drowning. I go through the motions, empty inside, like a sleepwalker, plodding along behind the others, yet hanging back. At times I am furious, frantic, resigned, devastated, seemingly trapped in the flow of the current, and desperately afraid of being discovered.

Lost Saints: In Italy, I drift through churches and museums full of Catholic icons and reliquaries, pieces of saints embellished with golden filagree, tucked inside ornate caskets. So many parallels. We worship, we adore, we need our saints to be perfect. Why was it so hard to finally let go, and realize that they are just like us?

Free Fall: A trap door opened beneath me, and I plunged down, down, down, not knowing how far I would fall. Mortality, eternity, death, resurrection, agency, hope, despair... a blur rushing past me as I fell. But then my feet found solid ground in an unexpected place. Like the crusader back from the Holy Land with a shipload of precious earth from Golgotha, I rebuilt my house on Sacred Ground. And like Eve, I embraced the fall forward, finding redemption in the Healer's wings. (The fresco behind the figures is from Buonamico Buffalmacco's Triumph of Death in the Campo Santo in Pisa.)

Processional: They said, don't ask questions...just move along, nothing to see here. You can't pick and choose; this isn't a cafeteria. Don't get off the train, (it's picking up speed and if you get off, you can't get back on.) Just polish the machine and keep it in good working order, all the little parts must be humming along. But where are we going? Are we tethered to a grinding wheel, treading the same circular path over and over or are we travelling forward like pilgrims on their way to Rome.

Limbo: I am past exhaustion, laid bare, with bones picked clean. My anger and my sorrow have hollowed me out and left me humbled. Like a child after a tantrum, I curl up, finally ready to listen to the quiet voice that speaks to me and says, be still and know that I am God.

Constructing the Myth: I see what they did. They polished and burnished until all the blemishes were hidden. Then they locked away the most damaging parts, hoping that they would never be discovered. They crafted a new Golden Legend and warned us not to look deeper. Truth is not always uplifting, they said. Truth destroys. But they forgot one of the deepest truths of all, "For there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; neither hid, that shall not be known."

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Transcendence: I no longer drag the deadweight bag of broken walls behind me; the remains of the windowless house built on sand. That heavy burden is gone, I left it at the feet of the Master builder. My new house is full of light. Its windows and doors are open wide, for the unseen wind to enter in. I sing a song of the sublime, a beautiful aching, a longing for home.

East of Eden: They told me that since I'm a woman, I had no voice, that it was not my call, that it was selfish to want more. Then why did God plant this hunger in my soul? Are they punishing me for Eve's transgression? Why? Is it because there is a terrible beauty and strength in the divine feminine? After all, wasn't it Eve who first understood that we must leave the garden and embrace mortality? As I travel my own circuitous path toward enlightenment, I find my voice and raise it heavenward. I cannot return to Eden. Instead, with my face upturned, I journey eastward toward God.

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