

*A Voice from
the Fire*

The Authority of Experience

Colleen C . Harrison

WINDHAVEN
PUBLISHING & PRODUCTIONS
PLEASANT GROVE, UTAH

PUBLISHED BY:

WINDHAVEN
PUBLISHING & PRODUCTIONS

PO Box 282

PLEASANT GROVE, UT 84062

WWW.WINDHAVENPUBLISHING.COM

Copyright © 2002 Colleen C. Harrison

All rights reserved. Except for brief quotations used in a review, the reproduction or utilization of this work in whole or in part in any form by electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereinafter invented, including xerography, photocopying, and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, is forbidding without the express written permission of the publisher.

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. By payment of the required fees, you have been granted the non-exclusive, non-transferable right to access and read the text of this ebook on screen. No part of this text may be reproduced, transmitted, downloaded, decompiled, reverse engineered, or stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now know or hereinafter invented, without the express written permission from the publisher.

This edition provided by e-zite, an electronic imprint of Rosehaven Publishing & Distribution, Inc. by arrangement with Windhaven Publishing & Productions, Inc.

Please do not participate in or encourage electronic piracy of copyrighted materials. Your support of the author's rights by purchasing only authorized editions is greatly appreciated. If you have obtained an unauthorized copy of this file, please contact www.ldsebookstore.com to purchase a legal copy.

Quotes used in personal journal writing may also be used without written permission as long as they are framed in quote marks and the full title of the book, *A Voice from the Fire: The Authority of Experience* is included.

ISBN: 1-930738-16-1

This book is a collection of memoiristic essays based on the life experiences of the author. Names have been changed and some of the descriptions of places and events have been altered to offer anonymity to both the innocent and the guilty.

*For all my children—
whoever they may be.*



Acknowledgements

Having seen many afflictions in the course of my days, nevertheless, having been highly favored of the Lord in *all* my days, having a great knowledge of the *goodness* and mysteries of God—the greatest mystery being an absolute witness that if we will be patient with Him, He will work *all things* together for our good—I thus acknowledge His hand in all things:

- in *all* my children, they are the jewels in my crown;
- in *both* my husbands, the contrast between bitter and sweet is beyond expression;
- in *all* my friends, for they have been the hands of the Lord to comfort and to teach;
- in *all* my enemies, for they have been His instruments to chasten and purify me, and examples of the truth that wickedness never was happiness.

Table of Contents

Shakespeare once compared all the world to a stage and all the men and women in it to mere players. I prefer to compare life to a novel—a Dickens style novel (which by the way, I did not enjoy in high school)—long and complicated, with a plot that ebbs and flows so often you feel dizzy trying to keep up with it. You feel like you’re drowning in the mundane details of your life. And then without warning, you are crushed in those conversely breath-taking, heart-wrenching scenes, when decision or destiny shatters the reverie of routine and causes such a divide that all the watershed of life, past and future, runs down hill from it. And the characters (including yourself) are puzzling, and sometimes perverse, with so many unpredictable strengths and weaknesses. And there are the combinations of interpersonal relationships—each person, each relationship, representing a simultaneous story, spinning out parallel to and yet intricately (and often confusingly) interwoven into each other’s design until you want to scream and throw the book against the wall and be done with it forever,...but you can’t, not without committing suicide. And tomorrow *is* another day—who knows what adventures may come.

Preface

—1—

A Ramble of My Own

—9—

A Voice From the Fire

—17—

In the Light of My Closet

—43—

An Imperative Duty

—71—

Train Up a Child

—85—

Flight from Fear

—97—

From Generation to Generation

—109—

God, Popeye and Me

—125—

*I*n the midst of the fiery moments of suffered and survived experience, I find myself able to testify with the power and the authority of *living* and *loving* Truth.

Families Are Forever: The Promise

—139—

Divorce—Act of Sin or Act of Repentance?

—143—

The Desert Shall Blossom as a Rose

—147—

To Set at Liberty Them That Are Bruised

—151—

Touch Not the Unclean Gift

—157—

The Wonder Child Within

—161—

A Ramble of Your Own

—165—

And for good measure, like the grains of sand poured in
among the larger stones to fill a cup of love, a few poems.

Words

—16—

Conversion

—42—

Wings!

—70—

In My Gethsemane

—84—

To My Third Child

—96—

Lost and Found

—124—

Cloud

—138—

Lies

—142—

On Leper's Feet
—146—

Please! Don't! Stop!
—156—

Metaphorically
—174—

About the Author

About the Publisher

Credits



I am a daughter of a Heavenly Father who loves me, and I love Him. I will stand as a witness of God at all times and in all things and in all places.

This is not idle rhetoric for me. I believe it absolutely, live by it absolutely—or as absolutely as a mortal human being can. When I pledge to stand as a witness of God, I stand as a witness of the *truth*, at all times, in all things, in all places. When we take the witness stand, we swear to tell “the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God.” With this book as my witness stand, I swear to let my voice be heard. I swear to share my experiences, my learnings, my *truth* with as many as will listen. My *truth*—the *truth about me, my life*—the *whole truth*, and nothing but the truth. For this reason I pray, “So, *help me, God.*”

A Voice from the Fire

The Authority of Experience

*My heart was hot within me, while I was
musing the fire burned.*

—*Psalms 39:3*

A victim is a martyr without a voice. A martyr is a victim that has found her voice. Exquisite pain becomes exquisite joy when Truth is loved and spoken in plainness and humility. It is my prayer that the only Muse I trust, even the Spirit of Truth, will possess me in this work, be with me in the fire and transform the fires of martyrdom for both me and my children into the fires of exaltation.

For this purpose I cry from the fire.

Preface



A job! You've never held a *job* in your life. You need to get one. You can't live on your ex-husband's "charity" forever. You need to earn your own way, sooner or later, you know. You need to do something *practical* with your degree."

These were the thoughts sitting heavy on my mind as I received my Bachelors Degree in English at the age of forty-six. It was all true. I was a single mother of twelve, with sole custody of five children under the age of eighteen as I received my diploma that beautiful June day in 1994.

I could hardly believe I had achieved this dream—a dream put on hold nearly three decades earlier when I married at the age of eighteen. I always knew I would go back to school someday, but I thought it would be for "fun," when our children were grown and I was left with time to relax. It didn't happen that way. Even though I spent those twenty-three years believing in the ideal and slogging through the "reality" of being a stay-at-home mom, it all came crashing down around me on that other June morning, three years ago. In just ten minutes, my "for time and all eternity"

marriage ran out of time. In ten minutes by the courtroom clock, my social and economic status changed 180 degrees. Suddenly I wasn't Colleen..., wife of...

I was “just” Colleen. Forty-two years old. Twenty-three years at home. Twelve children; eight still at home to feed, clothe, house, discipline and raise—alone. High school education plus two semesters of twenty-three-year-old college credits. Zero marketable skills. Income: from over \$50,000 annually to under \$20,000.

Still, I went through with the divorce.

It didn't matter to me whether I was jumping out of the proverbial frying pan and into the proverbial fire or not. The mixture of ingredients in the “pan”—in my “whited sepulcher” of a marriage—finally reached such a level of trauma that all my fears of poverty, of being on state welfare made no difference. I gave up my rigid interpretation of the LDS axiom, “Families are Forever.” If mine was going to be a “forever family,” it was going to have to be forever *for real*, without the pretense and false facade of “fineness” we lived behind for so long. For years I had turned the ideal of eternal marriage into idolatry. I put maintaining the appearance of marriage ahead of integrity, before respect of human life, including my own, before gospel principles, before concern for my children's well-being—before everything—even before family. It may sound crazy to some but, the truth was, my marriage was destroying any semblance of “family.”

As I stood in the entrance tunnel to the subterranean floor of the Marriott Center, only moments from hearing my name announced to signal my procession through the handshakes, congratulations, smiles, and pictures of commencement, I thought of yet another June when Karen, my oldest daughter, graduated from high school in this very same setting. I looked up at the rows and rows of seats in the cavernous arena, stretching upwards hundreds of feet into the shadows at the top of the building. At the level of the rotunda, sunlight barely penetrated, silhouetting the tiny

profiles of people as they came and went. From that distance there was no sound of their movements. They appeared less than an inch tall.

My eyes searched the thousands of faces of the people already seated. What if Karen was among them? What if she got “permission” to be here? What if it was all a mistake—the weekend she died? What if it was all a dream and this was the moment I was going to wake up? Far up in the sea of faces, I saw a form so familiar—at least similar. Someone waving wildly, blond-hair flashing. I pretended it was her and waved back. Someone yelled, “Go, Mom!” I let it be her. It would have been her. What if it *was* her? I mean, what about movies like *Ghost* and *Heart and Souls*. Come on. We love to believe.

She was dressed in a white cap and gown on her graduation day, replete with golden tassel that bounced and flounced with her jubilant movements. She was an angel-colored kite about to take off on a high wind. Even the heavy, almost garish lei of red and yellow flowers her best friend bought her didn’t detract from her buoyancy and the brilliance of her flashing smile. I remember her, cheering and waving as she walked across the dais. I remember hundreds of friends cheering her. Everyone knew Karen. Everyone loved Karen.

I smiled at the memory and checked the half-dozen hair pins holding my cap in place. I wasn’t nearly as young and brave and uninhibited as she had been. “Come on, Mom! Strut your stuff! You’ve earned it!” I could hear exactly what she would have said, if she could have. And maybe she did say it. Maybe those were her words, allowed into my mind by a loving and benevolent God. Tears welled up in my eyes. I was next. The sound of my name resounded through the air in the deep resonant tones of the announcer. “Rose CALL-eeen...” I spelled it that way on the card I filled out earlier, so it would be pronounced according to my Irish heritage and not “Co-leen,” the more common pronunciation. I walked out into the light, up the stairs, receiving handshakes and

congratulations and a temporarily empty diploma cover. I heard several of my other children cheering for me and in their tone, a touch of Karen's voice. It was enough.

On the hot August evening when Karen died, less than three short months after her high school graduation, she was into alcohol and drug use, running from the insanity perpetrated on her by both of her parents and their own more covert, socially acceptable addictions. The circumstances of her death sealed my testimony that the Lord Jesus Christ would stand with me through anything—no matter how “hot” the “fire” burned. I was also convinced of the truth that I could no longer live the lie—pretending things were not “that bad” in our family system.

For two years following Karen's death, I remained in the marriage, pleading with my husband to own our terrible private failure within our home. Finally, the day came that it was over. I had no more hope or stamina to offer. I accepted the inevitable consequences of the irreconcilable differences caused by my refusal to pretend, to “act as if,” to “fake it ‘til we make it.” It was over. I already said that, didn't I? I was done. I surrendered to the tremendously fearful cultural stigma that divorce would bring down upon me, living as I did in the very heart of Utah, in the very “shadow of the everlasting hills.”

Three long years of busy days and lonely nights had passed since my divorce. Now it was June, 1994. My bachelor's degree was finally in my hand. But what was I to do with it? I hadn't taken classes to prepare me to teach—the standard and most practical use of an English degree. I hadn't felt right about following that track. Believe me, after spending twenty-three years trying to make my marriage work, never feeling safe or happy, I wasn't willing to “settle” again for something I didn't want. Whatever I did for the rest of my life, I promised myself I would do it with honesty, or not at all.

In the days following my commencement, I spent hours of prayerful deliberation and meditation using my journal as a

catalyst and channel of communion with my deepest inner truths. I used meditative writing—as I’ve since learned to call it—to explore every option I could ponder my way through. The only option that felt good to me—that burned in my bosom, that brought tears of hope and desire to my eyes—was to apply to go on in school and obtain a masters degree in English. Several of my professors encouraged me to apply; they were glad to write letters of recommendation for me. But wouldn’t that just be more “impractical” training? What could I “do” with a masters degree in English? The perennial question was back, and of course it really meant, “What kind of job can you get with it?” I had no idea. Teach at a junior college? Become an editor? Those seemed like the two most logical, financially sound possibilities.

Oh, if I had only known then, dear reader, that the Lord God was going to lead me here, to this hour, to this joyful act of sharing my heart with you—my experience, strength, and hope—in the form of a collection of personal essays, I would have been so grateful and so amazed! But in the fall of 1994, I had no idea what was to come. Like Nephi in the *Book of Mormon*, I was led, not knowing beforehand what I should do (1 Nephi 4:6).



A Voice from the Fire: The Authority of Experience includes autobiographical and memoiristic essays submitted as my master’s thesis in 1996. I have also included several short expository essays, written originally for *Heartbeats*, a monthly newsletter of the Heart t’ Heart organization. Oh yes, and a poem or two for good measure.

The essay, “A Ramble of My Own,” was originally part of the scholarly introduction to the masters thesis collection. I was tempted to leave it out, thinking it too “academic” and “dry,” but

when I pray about it, it *feels good*, it feels right to leave it in. I feel impressed that some one of you might enjoy an account of how the Lord led me along from emphasis to emphasis in English studies until I finally *allowed* myself to be myself and do the thing I *love*—to write personally, honestly, heart to heart, gut to gut, and soul to soul.

The second half of the original “A Ramble of My Own” essay is at the very end of this collection, retitled “A Ramble of Your Own.” Here I explore the history of the personal essay. My hope in including it is kindle a flame in your heart, dear reader; to inspire you to find and explore a voice of your own.

In conclusion of this preface may I make as explicit as possible three “Articles of Belief” that stand supreme and unwavering in my soul—no matter how foolish and confusing my own choices or those of any other person in my life’s story may be:

First, I believe in Christ as the Divine Son of God who lived in mortality, died, and was resurrected, *physically* and spiritually. I believe He now reigns with our Heavenly Father and communicates, as one with our Father, to our hearts and minds through the power of the Holy Ghost. I am Christian through and through and have been since my earliest recollections. Nevertheless, I honor and appreciate teachings by any organized or unorganized religious effort that encourage people to do good and love God. I trust God in the diversity of people and the spirituality of each. I believe in their right to “worship how, where, or what they may.”¹ Nevertheless, the way that “works” for me is the “Way” of Christ. I worship Him and my Heavenly Father who sent Jesus to be my personal Savior and Friend.

Second, I believe in the restoration of the fullness of the original Christian theology (knowledge of God) as it is represented in the revelations of Joseph Smith, Jr. I honor him as a Prophet of God, as I honor all of the subsequent prophets and apostles who have led The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints even to this day. I find the *theology* of Mormonism the richest, deepest,

most soul satisfying rendition of Christianity that could ever be imagined by the human heart. “As man is, God once was. As God is, man may become”² is the core tenet of Mormon theology. No more gracious definition of mankind in relation to God has ever been offered to humanity.

Joseph Smith put it this way:

God was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens! That is the great secret. If the veil were rent today, and the great God who holds this world in its orbit, and who upholds all worlds and all things by his power, was to make himself visible,—I say, if you were to see him today, you would see him like a man in form—like yourselves in all the person, image, and very form as a man... Here, then, is eternal life—to know the only wise and true God; and you have got to learn how to be Gods yourselves, and to be kings [queens] and priests [priestesses] to God, the same as all Gods have done before you, namely, by going from one small degree to another, and from a small capacity to a great one...

It is the first principle of the Gospel to know for a certainty the Character of God, and to know that we may converse with him as one man converses with another. (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, pp. 345-346, Deseret Book Company, 1974.)

This theology is my ideology, my life-blood intellectually, as well as emotionally and spiritually. Its culture is my chosen religious community and practice, despite the human foibles and failings of its members, myself included. I am, as I am prone to say, a “tee-totalin’, card-carrying” member, despite injustices suffered at the hands of fellow mortal members.

In sweet conversation filled with counsel and comfort abounding, I have perceived the Lord’s own words come into my

mind. These words have been plainer, wiser, calmer, kinder, surer, truer than any words my often terrified, tumultuous mind could conceive or contrive. I share with you in these essays, snapshots in words—glimpses into the reality of one woman—so unique, yet so common. So strong, yet so weak. I pray you may be blessed by these moments of reflection and insight. I pray you may want to start recording your own. The whole truth is healing. It is the highest truth, the best truth, the *compound* truth that gives life and brings us to our truest potential. I bear this testimony, unceasingly, in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

—Colleen H.

¹*The Pearl of Great Price*, The Articles of Faith:11.

²James E. Talmage, *The Articles of Faith*. (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1968), 430. This idea is also referenced in the following couplet from the poem “Man’s Destiny” by Lorenzo Snow: “As man now is, our God once was; As now God is, so man may be,—” *Improvement Era*, 22:660-661, June 1919; also *Biography and Family Record of Lorenzo Snow*, Eliza R. Snow (Salt Lake City, 1884); *The Teachings of Lorenzo Snow*, comp. Clyde J. Williams (Salt Lake: Bookcraft, 1984), 2.

A Ramble of My Own



And I was led by the Spirit, not knowing beforehand the things which I should do. (1 Nephi 4:6)

The essayist, unlike the novelist, the poet, and the playwright, must be content in his self-imposed role of second class citizen. A writer who has his sights trained on the Nobel Prize or other earthly triumphs had best write a novel, a poem, or a play, and leave the essayist to ramble about, content with living a free life and enjoying the satisfactions of a somewhat undisciplined existence. –E.B. White¹

I came into my English master’s program in 1994, already a personal essayist by nature, living more than a “somewhat undisciplined existence.” I have to admit, though, my “rambling” through life has often felt more like stumbling. I mean, I literally stumbled into writing this collection of essays, originally disguised as a scholarly thesis.

In the spirit of the true essayist, I had no clue where I was going when I started my program. It was a ramble, a “walkabout”² in the

field of English studies, which to this day remains a cherished diversion. And even today, nearly a decade after my successful thesis defense and graduation, after years of preparation for a doctorate degree in human development and family life, I still see no closure on my “career” as an essayist. I’m not sure closure is part of an essayist’s psychic paradigm.

I spent my first semester as a graduate student on familiar turf, right in the same department—the same building, the same faculty and a few of the same fellow students—as I spent the previous three years. I’m afraid I didn’t feel secure or “arrived,” as you’d think a person might. Instead, I felt utterly and thoroughly confused. What was I doing in classes, I kept thinking, when I should be in a therapist’s office trying to survive and sort out my life? During the five years it took me to finish my bachelors work, I staggered, rather than stumbled, to school day after day. I lived through burying my oldest daughter, who died in an automobile accident so infamous I still have new acquaintances who recall hearing about it on the 10 o’clock news, over ten years ago. And then there was the ten-minute divorce proceeding that culminated twenty years of a marriage I had invested my soul in, planning on eternity.

Through the mental and emotional fog of this cumulative trauma, I vaguely understood I was expected to “declare an emphasis” for my M.A. program. I sat in my advisor’s office, staring out the window as he talked to someone on the phone.

Declare an emphasis? *Emphasis: force or intensity of expression that gives importance to something.* How was I supposed to know what was important anymore? I once thought, believed, *lived* the one expression that gave my life importance—homemaking. And now I had to get a *real* education and a *real* job. Too bad I couldn’t use any of the former emphases—the ones I knew so well: husband, children, diapers, menus, bottled fruit, home-made bread, handmade clothes. I didn’t say any of this aloud to my advisor, of course. He finished his phone call and turned back to

me. I smiled, hoping not to appear as dazed as I felt. I know how to be insane behind “just fine” smiles.

So what would my emphasis be for my graduate studies in English? What were my choices? Early British Lit, Late British Lit, Early or Late American Lit, Rhetoric, or Creative Writing. I chose “Early British Literature” for no good reason other than it was first on the list and I vaguely remembered enjoying Shakespeare, iambic pentameter, and the King James Edition of the Bible in a couple of undergraduate classes.

By the beginning of my second semester, I realized I was more fascinated with the “psychology” behind the use of language than with any literary era or style. I changed my emphasis to Rhetoric. *Rhetoric: the art of speaking or writing effectively, to persuade.*

In rhetoric classes, though, I still could not feel satisfied or settled. I found myself far too self-reflective and subjective to be a detached intellectual. While others around me were budding and blossoming into master scholars, I found myself producing pages of single-spaced personal reflections and reactions to as little as one sentence from the authors and texts we studied. I was embarrassed by my “egotism,” and tried hard to be a true academic—aloof and intellectual. Most of the time, I despaired my attempts and knew they were in vain. I could not focus more than minimal attention on class assignments. My devastated psyche, staggering from the trauma I was trying to ignore, had an “assignment” I could not avoid—*comprehend your journey or die*. I spent hours writing in my personal journals. I felt like no one could teach me what I needed to know. The lessons I needed would not be found in the writings of other people.

It was nearly two years before I stumbled onto Samuel Johnson’s explanation for my dilemma:

The essayist...seldom harasses [her] reason with long trains of consequences, dims [her] eye with the perusal

of antiquated volumes, or burthens [her] memory with great accumulations of preparatory knowledge.³

Caught in this still unconscious need for self-expression, I found that no matter how hard I tried to keep my reflections and opinions to myself, I kept speaking up in class, sharing *my* thoughts on *any* and *every* subject we discussed in class.

“Could you reference that to one of the authors you were supposed to have read over the previous week?” I was asked. My teacher wanted to know I was studying.

No. These were “just” my own reflections. I had no idea, then, that I was, according to Mikhail Bakhtin’s words, quoted by Peter Elbow, just coming to myself:

One’s own discourse and one’s own voice, although born of another or dynamically stimulated by another, will sooner or later begin to liberate themselves from the authority of the other’s discourse.⁴

Meanwhile, I thought I was failing, bumping and blundering through my classes. Now, I realize I was actually being led along, all the while gaining the greatest education I could ever hope to obtain. I was coming to know *me*—my mind, my heart, my opinions—an accomplishment that, at forty-eight, was long overdue. I take solace in the promise of Christ’s parable of the laborers coming to the vineyard being equally rewarded, whether they came early or late. I had to trust that getting to know me and my own “I-am” could somehow be transformed by the Lord into a masters thesis and a degree.

Still, I was not “applying” myself to gaining knowledge that I, as a single parent receiving minimal child support from my ex-husband, could use to support myself and my five minor children. How could I justify learning about something as “tangential to the marketplace”⁵ as myself? I had to be *practical*. I had to prepare myself to earn a living. *Still*, I couldn’t ignore the greater truth my

“education” was revealing to me: “a living” wasn’t something I needed to earn but something I needed to *be*; that “living” was meant to be a verb, not a noun. But where in the “discipline” of English studies could I find an environment conducive to such self-expression?

When I took my first creative writing class, it was as an elective, a fluke, another stumble. Early British Lit held nothing for me; rhetoric required burying yourself in other people’s opinions, persuasions. Creative writing seemed like an easy way out of all that. After all, I had written some “creative” stuff back in Junior High. I’d even won a “creative” writing contest or two over the years.

I had to ask for special permission from my professor, Leslie Norris, since I hadn’t taken any undergraduate creative writing courses. Luckily he had been my instructor in a previous class on the Romantic period in England and watched me come to tears in class over the poetry of Blake, Wordsworth, and Coleridge. He’d also worked with me directly in preparing a paper on John Donne for an undergraduate literature conference. I think he knew how desperate I was to find a place where the only endnote I needed for my work was my own byline.

As the first half of that semester passed, I sat through the other students’ readings of their poetry, short stories, chapters from budding novels, and screenplays. I was awed by the collective talent around me and began to feel more and more like I had stumbled into another land where I was destined to remain a stranger, a beggar, an “also-ran.” I could not produce thoughts as crystalline and succinct as the poets, though I thrilled to the freedom they took in their “associative leaps”⁶ of metaphor and insight. Neither could I identify with fiction. My own experience and my own authority cried out to be acknowledged and shared, not veiled in someone else’s name or character.

Gradually, amidst the confusion, I felt myself developing a definite sense of “vocation,” though not in the modern, material-

istic sense. No, this vocation was the kind I had read about in Scott Peck's *A World Waiting to Be Born*:

The word vocation literally means “calling”...which may or may not coincide with one's occupation, with what one is actually doing.

In this sense vocation implies a relationship. For if someone is called, something must be doing the calling...so also may some [people] spend years—even a lifetime—fleeing their true vocation...in either some kind of fear of failure or fear of success or both... So God's unique vocation for each of us invariably calls us to personal success, but not necessarily success in the world's stereotypical terms or means of measurement.⁷

It was not until midterm interviews, one-on-one, that I confessed my dilemma to Professor Norris. Haltingly I admitted to him what I am sure his sense of “vocation” as a gifted teacher had already told him—that the two poems and the several attempts at fiction I had handed in so far were *not* my forte. In one sentence he branded me and set me free: “You're a personal essayist.” My lack of comprehension was thick in the air of his little office, but he only smiled warmly and continued, “Which doesn't surprise me. The personal essay is *the* genre of Mormonism because of its investment in subjective, personal experience. Subjective, highly personal experience is the very heart of your religion, you know?”

No, I didn't know that. I thought losing yourself to serve others was the very heart of my religion.

The rest of the semester went more smoothly for me as I reworked a couple of essays I had written several years before, borrowing the style of the late Erma Bombeck. I still wasn't brave enough to let go and create brand new material from my current life experience. I wasn't sure how to write about the drastic turn my life had taken in recent years. Besides, who in the LDS culture would want to read of such imperfection and uncertainty?

The next semester I took a second creative writing course, determined to hold my own in the midst of the poets and short story writers. I still wasn't sure I belonged, but I was sure I wanted to be there. Then God arranged what Scott Peck calls a "graceful intervention,"⁸ which set my feet squarely on the path of the personal essayist.

Phillip Lopate, author of a highly acclaimed and definitive work on the personal essay, *The Art of the Personal Essay*, came to Brigham Young University and to my 518R class. Enthralled, I followed him from my class to another class and to his afternoon reading. I would have followed him home if I'd had the airfare. Instead I invested in his book. As I read, I wept with relief to find permission to own my own style—vernacular, conversational, intimately honest; my own genre—personal, self-revelatory, rambling, tentative, not complete: in other words—my own voice. By the end of that semester I knew where I belonged, where I was called. For better or worse, I filled out the paperwork to change my emphasis one last time.

¹E.B. White, *Essays of E.B. White*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1979); quoted in Phillip Lopate, *The Art of the Personal Essay: An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present*. (New York: Doubleday, 1994), xxxiii.

²Phillip Lopate, *The Art of the Personal Essay: An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present*. (New York: Doubleday, 1994), xli.

³Samuel Johnson, *The Rambler*, p. 201; quoted in Carl Klaus, "Essayists on the Essay," in *Literary Nonfiction: Theory, Criticism, Pedagogy*, ed. Chris Anderson (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP), 158.

⁴Peter Elbow, "The Pleasures of Voice," *Literary Nonfiction: Theory, Criticism, Pedagogy*, ed. Chris Anderson (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP), 230.

⁵Lopate, xxxiii.

⁶Phillip Lopate, "An Interview with Phillip Lopate," interview by John Bennion, *AWP Chronicle*, no. 4, vol. 28 (February 1996): 1.

⁷M. Scott Peck, *A World Waiting to Be Born: Civility Rediscovered*, (New York: Bantam, 1993), 61-63, 67.

⁸*Ibid.*, 77.

Words

Dear God!
I am filled with such fire,
Such burning,
Such energy!
How stilted,
How black and white
These words look.
There's no way
To catch the fire,
No way to say the
Burning.
And in the trying
The energy is thinned.
Thinned to words.
Mere words.
But words are
All
I have.
Words will have to do.
Words that only mumble,
Barely whisper
What I hear
In stereophonic sound,
Standing in the midst
Of the choir,
Singing my heart out.