

We Know Their Daughters' Names  
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*This talk was given at a retreat for Mormon women at the Kirtland Temple in Kirtland, Ohio.*

Several years ago a tree in my parents' yard had a near-death experience. I was a college student, home for the summer. My parents had gone out of town for the weekend. So of course I was having a party. During the party a tornado-spawning storm came through. The tornado missed our neighborhood but when we went outside we found that a twenty-foot tall pine tree had blown completely over. It was lying on its side across the front yard, torn roots dangling from a root ball that stood four feet high.

The root ball wasn't a cute round thing. It was flat and messy. But my friends and I saved the tree. It took all of us, but we heaved the trunk back into a standing position, where it swayed slightly, then held its ground. When my parents returned, I commented on the good fortune that I had been having a party during the storm. My dad sighed, then reinforced the tree. He tied a long rope to the highest heavy branches and anchored it in the ground. Somehow he hauled a two-ton rock over; it still sits today at the base of the tree. The tree has grown another 20 feet. We could never hoist it back up now.

But the point of the story is not the rescuing of the tree. The point is the root ball. The reason the root ball was so shallow and broad is that the tree grows over the septic system. Out in the countryside here, many homes have their own septic systems instead of relying on city-supplied water. The grass is always greener over the septic system, of course, but the trees that grow there have shallow roots and can be blown over in any passing tornado-spawning storm, which happens not infrequently here in northeast Ohio.

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The United States is considered by some indigenous cultures today to have a cultureless society because we lack deeply-rooted mythologies and hero tales. What heroes come down to us from our 231-year history have largely been debunked in the past generation. The result is not having heroes that imbue us with a collective sense of values, identity and purpose. We are a shallow root ball.

But the even younger culture of Mormonism has its own mythology. It stretches its roots deeply, intertwining them with the deeper roots of Christian history and before that Hebrew culture. In the scriptures Mormons find our earliest heroes, broad-stroked stories of faith, doubt, struggle, obedience, and rebellion. Themes that resonate with the broader human experience, as all good mythologies do. (A note here: when I say mythology, I don't mean to say that a story is true or untrue. A myth in the strictest sense is simply a story of our origins, from which we derive a common sense of identity and values, a sense of our relationship with God and each other.)

We tell and retell the stories of our origins and the people of our past as found in our scriptures. We always find some sort of lesson in them. But the scriptures, however valuable, are all male

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voices. It doesn't make them bad or untrue. But women's voices are missing. We don't even know Nephi's daughters' names, or his sisters' names.

And so we come to Historic Kirtland. Here we see some of Mormonism's earliest female mythology. Elizabeth Ann Whitney tells of the visionary dream she shared with her husband. Eliza tells of meeting the prophet Joseph. Emma is central to the action, both her domestic life and her work in church administration. We hear women's voices, we know of their travails in child-bearing, we read of their domestic frustrations and petty squabbles and spiritual manifestations. We probably know far more than they want us to! But: we know their daughter's names.

Mormonism is **still** strongly rooted in a communal spirituality. We learn from each other, for better or for worse. **The process of building a mythology is ongoing. It requires the full participation of each generation to learn, reinterpret, add to, and pass along the stories of the past. I need to understand the experiences of women in the 1940s, 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s as much as I need the more distant past, in order to make sense of my own experience, and pass it on.**

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Because I am a writer I think everyone should write. Or at least tell stories. If there's one story you must tell it's that of your credo. What do you believe and why? I would like to inspire you in this assignment by quoting from the credo of Catholic writer Brian Doyle<sup>1</sup>. He wrote it in answer to the question, "Why am I a Catholic?"

"I believe that a carpenter's son named Jesus indeed cracked time in half, entered this world in the guise of a squalling infant, said his piece, was slaughtered for his pains, and cracked time again on his way home. I have no real basis for this belief, and neither do you. We either believe the man or we do not, and I do, for reasons I know and do not know.

[He talks about Catholicism being the faith of his family, his youth, his mentors.]

But I believe in Christ for muddier reasons. Sometimes I desperately need to lean on a god wiser and gentler than myself. Sometimes I desperately need to believe that when I die I will not be sentenced to...the cold voice of Nothing, but rather I will be at peace and draped in Light. Sometimes I am nudged toward belief by the incredible persistence and eerie genius of the tale: the encompassing love of the mother, the wordless strength of the Father, the Lord of All Worlds cast ashore on this one as a mewling child in dirty straw. Sometimes I am moved past reason by the muscular poetry and subtle magic of these stories. Sometimes it is an intuitive yes as the light fails and the world is lit from below. And sometimes I simply cast my lot with the sheer bravura of such a patently brazen lie. That a man could die and live again is ridiculous; even a child knows that death is the end.

Or is it?

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Doyle, *Leaping: Revelations and Epiphanies*. Chicago: Loyola Press, 2003, pp.63-65.

I do not want to be sure about that. I want to meet my quiet father-in-law, a man I never knew, and thank him for the lovely miracle of his last daughter. I want to meet my brother Jimmy, who died in his carriage on a bright April day in 1947. I want to meet William Blake, Dexter Gordon, Crazy Horse, Robert Louis Stevenson, Rosemary Clooney. I want to kiss my grandmother again on her leathery cheek. I would like to meet this fellow Christ, who haunts the edges of my dreams....I would like to live forever, and hold my wife and daughter and twin sons in my arms until the end of time.

[He talks of the Catholic church as a house that admittedly needs cleaning.] But it is also a house where hope lives....Hope is what we drink from the odd story of the carpenter's odd stepson. When we eat his body in the ludicrous miracle of the Mass, we hope in him, and with him, forever and ever, world without end, amen, amen, amen."

I **trust** that honest confession of both faith and self-conscious doubt, and his story gives me greater hope. **Take the stories you have heard this weekend from other women, living and gone. Weave them into yours, or yours into them. Pass them on. Deepen our roots, strengthen our branches, add more women's voices to our collective sense of who we are. Give the future the gift of your voice.**