

Essay on “Faith”

BY GIDEON BURTON

I don't know and have never met Eliza Campbell. She exists for me only as a persona, a voice scattered over a few hundred words. Her entire existence—to me—is just ten minutes of vicarious experience that I spend with someone of indefinite age and no fixed background except our common faith. And yet she is someone I would like to know or have known, or perhaps she is a person that, in some regard, I am.

This is the power of the personal essay, a genre that some LDS critics have considered to be singularly consonant with Latter-day Saint experience. Located along that continuum of personal expression and belief that includes the privacy of the diary and the public confession of testimony bearing, the personal essay conveys in simplicity Paul's admonition to “prove all things” and Peter's to “be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you.”

And while Eliza's hope is evidently in Christ, she gives us not a Sunday School generalization;

she offers the lived experience of doubt and tears. We are thrust into the upsetting chaos of adolescent life when our early certainties give way to experience that is both thrilling and disappointing. Hers is a reflection both bright and dark, held steady by the beam of that personal voice that summons us to sympathy without sentimentality.

This is nowhere more evident than in the climax of her essay, where she invokes anything but a pastoral image or a cheesy religious cliché. As she achieves what normal Mormon folks would call “her testimony,” this is expressed “cloudy as meat and blood”—harking back to the image of a bloodied Christ that she mentions earlier, a Jesus not so antiseptic as a sweet sermon on redemption. No, Eliza's witness is one of fire and smoke: sacramental, primal, sudden.

Faith is evanescent, but within Campbell's essay, it takes a body—a bruised and bloody form, as adequate for spiritual reality as it is for literary authenticity. Listen to her voice. It rings true. ■