

Introduction

Making Decisions, Finding Direction: How This Issue Came to Be

BY JAMES GOLDBERG

In January, *Mormon Artist* sent out a call for submissions: we wanted short stories, poems, and essays from LDS writers under thirty. We had prize money for our favorite three entries and were willing to publish our top five. We didn't know quite what to expect. Would anyone even respond? What would the entries look like? All we really knew, in fact, was that people have been talking about the future of Mormon art for a long time—and that we at *Mormon Artist* wanted to find out more about its present form and condition. We wanted to show ourselves and our audience what's happening among younger writers right now.

Word got out and we did get an encouraging number of submissions, especially in the poetry category. We were impressed by the genuine feeling in them, by the way writing seems like an integral part of life for young LDS people from a wide range of areas and backgrounds. How many poems, we wondered, are written on any given Sunday across the Mormon world? How many Latter-day Saints, growing up on the poetry of scripture, learn to think about their own lives in poetic terms? How deep does the rich, grass-roots vein of LDS artistic expression go?

Reading the submissions would have been a simple and wonderful experience—except that we had to pick winners. If you've never judged a contest, you might not realize how complicated a process that can be. In order to decide which piece of writing is the "best" or most worth publishing, you have to decide what you think artistic writing most needs to do. After reading, judges have to find a way to talk to each other about what seems most worthwhile, and more importantly *why*.

Many of the submissions we received were sincere and direct personal statements of faith, values, and testimony—which is great, unless you're trying to decide whose testimonies are worth two hundred dollars. And which testimonies should you publish—her belief in prayer, his goals for his future? These pieces were good in the most significant sense: they expressed goodness. Wasn't that what we wanted? And yet how could we choose?

A few entries were totally different in approach. Instead of sharing ideas and beliefs we immediately

recognized, they made familiar things seem strange and new. Davey Morrison Dillard's poem, for example, gave us a Jesus who was bizarre, who put mud on a blind guy's face, instead of the glowing and serene Jesus we're familiar with. Eliza Campbell gave us a Jesus who lived in the television set, defined not by a holy, but by an electronic glow. And we, as judges, were surprised and a little awed with the narrators when they found healing through these strange men, these unexpected Saviors.

The trouble with having the truth, in my experience, is that it can be easy to get numb to it. During my mission, for example, I would often lose focus when translating during meetings from German to English; it was so easy to simply repeat the kinds of phrases I'd heard in church thousands of times before that sometimes I'd forget to stop and think again about what they meant. This is also the problem with the standard lists of Sunday School answers: they are true, but hearing about them doesn't always have the power to snap our minds out of cruise control.

Is this why the Book of Mormon begs us so often to remember—since our minds can tune out things precisely because they are so familiar to us?

The pieces in this magazine were chosen because they made old truths look different enough to wake us up emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually. They invited us to deepen our relationships with gospel truths by making us really think and feel about them again, even after we stopped reading.

Perhaps this is what we, as a gospel community, most desperately need from art today. We have a great deal of art designed to represent us, to stand for things we already know well. We need more art designed to surprise and engage us, art that reintroduces us to the known, that shows us how much we have yet to understand about it.

As can be seen in this special issue, that kind of art is a part of the Mormon present—and if we value and foster it, can be a greater part of the Mormon future.

** This essay owes a great deal to Viktor Shklovsky's 1916 essay "Art as Technique."*