



Close Encounters

*W*hen I reflect back on what was probably my first close encounter with Mormons (it would have been of the third kind), I must have been about five years old. It was summer. I distinctly remember answering a knock at the front door. Looking up, I saw standing there on the front porch two well-scrubbed young men with short hair, dressed in white short-sleeved shirts and ties. Remember, in 1955, all the men and boys wore their hair short, so that was nothing unusual. They asked if either of my parents were home. I went and got Mom. When Mom got to the door and saw those two young men standing there, it was as if all hell had broken loose. You would have thought there were a couple of devils on our front porch, based on her reaction. Although I don't remember so much what Mom said, I clearly remember how she said it. She had a tongue that could clip a hedge. There was no doubt in my tender young mind that she wasn't the least bit happy having these two boys standing on her front porch. Surprised at her reaction, I remember thinking something like, *Wow, why is she so mad at these two guys? They look nice enough.* Now she may have said something to me at the time regarding what had just taken place, but I don't remember it.

My second encounter with Mormons came about the time I was in the ninth grade. There was a nice, quiet family that lived not too far from us. They went to the same church we



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did. Their surname was McGinn (name has been changed). Their oldest son, also named Jay, and I were in the same classes, both at school and at church. We had pretty much grown up together. All of a sudden, the McGinn family had disappeared, on Sundays anyway. The next time I saw Jay at school I asked him why I hadn't seen him and his family at church. As matter-of-factly and as nonchalantly as any fifteen-year-old would be expected to, he told me they had joined the Mormon Church. For all the impact that piece of information had on me, he may as well have been speaking Chinese.

Chances are—and, again, I really don't remember exactly—I went home and shared with my parents why the McGinns were no longer at church. Just as before, Mom went off on another tirade against Mormons. She made it abundantly clear that there was nothing nice to be said about them, their church, or the McGinns. There was absolutely, positively, no doubt in my mind about how Mom felt about Mormons. In her mind they were a wicked bunch and their teachings were evil. Evidently, according to her, they were something not too far removed from the Prince of Darkness himself. Scary folks, those Mormons!

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Now if you've been counting (and there's no reason why you should have been), it was about ten years from my first close encounter to the second. Oddly enough, it would be another ten years before my third close encounter with a Mormon. This time it would take things in a whole new direction, a direction I would have never dreamed of in a million years.

At the time, I was relatively fresh out of college; it had been less than a year, and I was teaching commercial art classes at a high school in Raleigh, North Carolina. Back then, I didn't look any different from the high school students I was teaching. During those first few weeks, I can't tell you how many times I had been stopped in the halls by older, more seasoned teachers asking to see my hall pass. When I told them I was a teacher, some looked suspicious, others looked embarrassed, and still others looked insulted. In any case, part of my responsibilities as a teacher was to help with after-school extracurricular activities. On one such occasion, I was asked to help chaperone and drive a group of students from the theatre classes to Louisburg College to see a performance of a popular pantomime (he had been a protégé of the legendary French mime, Marcel Marceau).

It was a chilly autumn evening, probably a Friday. The air was clear and the wind was cold. We stood outside, shivering in front of the high school, waiting. The kids had divided themselves into their usual cliques and were huddled together to keep warm. I simply wanted to know who was going to be riding in my car. After some boisterous discussion, and even more arm twisting, the students were divided among us adults and were told who they would be riding with. One small excited, animated group, as most theatre students are, came bounding over to my car and announced that it was going to be my privilege to drive them to the performance. I deftly countered that it would indeed be their privilege to ride in my vintage 1961 Mercury Comet.

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As I was saying this, my eyes quickly scanned the little group, and I recognized a couple of my own students. Then my gaze came to rest on one particular girl. She was standing behind the others. I hadn't seen her before. Evidently, she was a new student. Looking at her, my eyes lingered for a moment, not because she was such a pretty girl (which she was), but because there seemed to be something different about her. She looked different. It was as though she had an aura around her face. Her countenance was distinctly and discernibly different from all the other students. Brushing it aside, I urged the rowdy bunch into the car, and we hurried on our way.

Over the next several weeks, through school activities, I came to know the girl that rode in my backseat that autumn evening. Her name was Linda. She and her family had just moved to Raleigh from Bellevue, Washington, as the result of her father being transferred by IBM. My first impressions of Linda were correct. She wasn't like most of the other teenagers. She spoke respectfully to the adults. She didn't use profanity or tell dirty jokes. She didn't smoke or drink or do drugs. She dressed stylishly yet modestly. She always had a smile on her face, a kind tone in her voice, and an encouraging word for everyone she spoke to. In short, she was a pleasure to be around. As time passed, I was drawn to Linda. Everyone, it seemed, was drawn to Linda.

At this time I was renting a room from a charming lady by the name of Mary Jane, who lived in a nicer, more affluent section of Raleigh. Mary Jane, a divorced single mom, had a daughter Linda's age, named Laurie, who was one of my art students. Laurie was, in her own way, a sweet girl, but she was the antithesis of Linda in many ways.

One Friday evening, Laurie had a birthday party to which she invited all her friends from school. Even I was invited. (I can't

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imagine ever inviting one of my high school teachers to a party at my house!) Granted, I lived there, but I pretty much stayed to myself in my downstairs room when family events were in progress. In all fairness, the family, Laurie, her mom, and her older brother did go out of their way to make me feel as though their home was mine. I did feel welcomed there.

Getting back to the birthday party, Linda was among the guests invited. Not only had she been invited, but she had been also asked to spend the night with Laurie. As the night wore on and the party ran down, people began to leave. Later that evening, it was just Laurie and her boyfriend, and Linda and me. I'm not sure where Laurie and her boyfriend were. I think they were upstairs in the kitchen eating the leftovers. Linda and I were sitting cross-legged on the floor in front of the fireplace downstairs in the den, staring into the flames and talking about our innermost thoughts. At one point, I asked Linda if she believed in God. She said she did. I asked her if she was a religious person. She assured me that she was. A few more questions along those lines may have been asked, and then I asked her what church she belonged to. Her answer came, "The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints." Everything I had been thinking came to a screeching halt. My first thought was, *That's an awfully long name for a church.* The second thought was, *I have no idea what she's talking about. I've never heard of a church by that name.* Rather than expose my ignorance (after all I was a schoolteacher), I moved on changing the subject to something entirely unrelated.

The next morning, while everyone else was still in bed, I went into the den and pulled the *C* volume of the *World Book Encyclopedia* down from the shelf and looked up "The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints." I hadn't gotten past the first sentence of the first paragraph before I learned the awful

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truth. Linda was a Mormon! The first thought that came to my mind was, *Oh no, I've been fraternizing with the enemy!*

As the weeks progressed, a major disagreement arose between the high school principal and me. To make a long story short, I wound up resigning from my teaching position and found work as a commercial photographer at the pharmaceutical company Burroughs Wellcome (now GlaxoSmithKline).

Shortly after my leaving the school, I was invited to have dinner with Linda and her family at their home. The family consisted of her father (Bill), mother (Marie), older brother (Steve, who was out of the country serving a two-year mission), two younger brothers (Mike and Glen), and the younger twin sisters (Kathy and Karen, or was it Karen and Kathy?). The dinner was excellent. Although I don't remember exactly what was served, I do remember being introduced to a dish that seems to be uniquely Mormon—and that was lime Jell-O with shredded carrots. Actually, it tastes better than it sounds.

I remember thinking as I sat there at the table, listening to their familial banter, *I've never seen a family like this before*. The parents got along with their children, the children got along with their parents, the children got along with each other. Granted, there were times when things got a little out of hand, some of the younger ones got a little rambunctious, and the parents had to step in and exercise some parental control; but, by and large, it was a very calm evening. The unique qualities I had found in Linda, I found in her family. Now having said that, I don't mean to imply that Linda's family was the first nice family I'd ever seen; that simply wouldn't be true. However, there was something different there. There was a warmth and a love in that home that I had never seen before in any home I'd ever been in, including the one where I grew up.

As I was driving home that night, I thought to myself, *Okay,*