Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, University Hall, Harvard University, 1999. Laurel was a professor of history at the University of New Hampshire from 1980–1995. Since 1995, she has been a professor of history at Harvard where she specializes in early American social history, women's history, and material culture. Photograph by Jim Harrison.

"Challenging the Model": Reflections of Laurel Thatcher Ulrich

Interview by Nathan H. Williams

How does someone born and raised in conservative Sugar City, Idaho, become a Pulitzer Prize-winning author and a distinguished professor of American history at Harvard University? Laurel Thatcher Ulrich made this journey and openly discusses the defining experiences and the ideals that have helped create many of the "primary principles" that govern her life.

At an early age, Laurel discovered a love of and a gift for writing. As a teenager attending Sugar-Salem High School during the 1950s, she submitted numerous poems to *Seventeen*. Editors encouraged her writing interests by publishing a Christmas story of hers called "Sugar City Magic." For Laurel, writing became a powerful tool to communicate ideas and influence others. After high school, she studied and wrote her way through English courses at the University of Utah, graduating in 1960. That same year she moved to Cambridge with her husband, Gael. Ten years later while living in Massachusetts, Laurel was drawn to a circle of women who were driven to experience more than motherhood. After many passionate gatherings addressing various issues in the Church and society, these East Coast sisters decided to do more than talk. From this engaged group, they created the periodical *Exponent II*, providing these LDS women with the venue they sought. Not only did Laurel provide many interesting pieces for *Exponent II*, but she also continued to study at Simmons College in Massachusetts, where she graduated with an MA in English literature. Writing has always been a part of who Laurel is.

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Her *Exponent II* essays were cathartic as she worked through some of the inconsistencies and injustices she encountered in being female and Mormon.

While raising a family of five in New Hampshire, Laurel enrolled in graduate courses at the University of New Hampshire, Gael's place of employment. During these years of schooling, which included church activity, writing and publishing in *Exponent II*, and raising a young family, Laurel would often joke with Gael "that tuition is cheaper than a psychiatrist." In 1976 Laurel published a scholarly essay focusing on Puritan funeral sermons, which she titled "Virtuous Women Found." Years later a journalist reviewing this essay discovered a particular sentence that eventually became a national slogan: "Well-behaved women seldom make history." Laurel has a captivating writing style that draws readers in and leaves them with images, ideas, and one-liners that are difficult to forget. Laurel used the "well-behaved women seldom make history" phrase again for the title of her most recent book published in 2007, describing influential women throughout history.

Laurel has always been interested in explaining her experience and understanding of Mormonism, but her most notable academic achievement came after devoting years of research to understanding and explaining the obscure New England midwife, Martha Ballard. After graduating with a PhD from the University of New Hampshire, Laurel devoted over eight years trying to understand and tell Martha's story. In many ways, Laurel is a historical seer. She sees questions, stories, issues, and contextual information in documents that many people fail to see. Her ability to find these messages and meanings in historical documents was key in telling Martha's story. *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785–1812* was published in 1990 and received the Pulitzer Prize in 1991. This brought Laurel national attention, and led to her eventual employment as a professor of history at Harvard University, where she currently teaches, researches, and mentors students. She is currently researching nineteenth-century Mormon diarists, trying to discover the meaning of Mormonism in the daily lives of early Church members.

Laurel is a woman of intellect, humor, kindness, and justice. She is a remarkable historian and gifted writer. Her intellectual talents and moral foundation keep her connnected and committed to both the academy and the Church.

In addition to specific interview questions, there are quotes from Laurel's past that she freely reflects on.

The Interview

"Feminism and history helped me find a different sort of magic in my rural upbringing."

LAUREL: Feminism and history probably helped me see a lot of the value in my rural past. I have to use the past tense because the Sugar City I knew washed away when the Teton Dam broke in 1976. Sugar City was a very proud town. I think it had about nine hundred people most of the time I grew up there. The sugar factory was gone, but I think the tower was still there so there was the memory of that ambition of a little urban space in Madison County, Idaho. Other than Main Street, the town did not have street names or numbers. I didn't grow up on a farm but I did grow up in town two blocks from Main Street, which was a main highway to Yellowstone. We had a very large lot that was big enough for a barn, cows, pigs, chickens, horses, a garden and whatever else, so there was a rural feel to it. A few miles down the back road there was an eighty-acre farm that my mother, Alice Siddoway, inherited from her father. My father, J. Kenneth Thatcher, and my brothers Conley and Gordon ran the farm. My father also taught school at Sugar-Salem High School, where he eventually became the principal, and later became the superintendent of schools.

NATHAN: In our earlier conversations you mentioned something significant happening to you in fifth or sixth grade that stirred your interest in writing. What happened?

LAUREL: I don't know that it was a significant moment. I do remember starting to write poems about then, probably in Elda Smith's fifth grade class, but I don't remember. I do remember being in the big, rock school building by the railroad tracks where I started to be interested in writing little poems and things. I don't think that desire ever left, and it was nurtured remarkably and importantly by Verla Chapman, my high school English teacher. She was terrific!

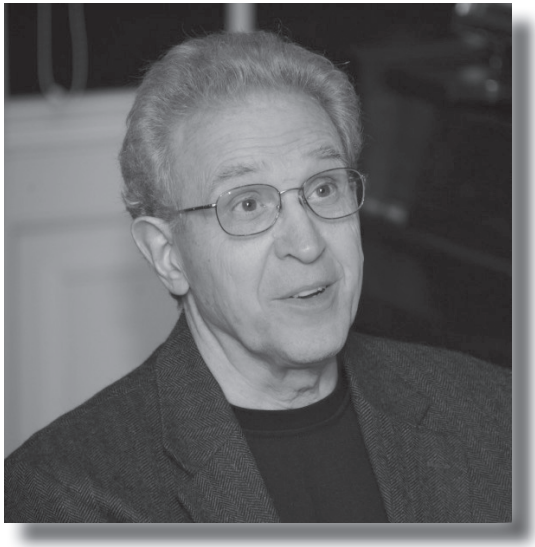
"The more I learned about writing, the less confident I was that I had anything to say."

LAUREL: Yes. I think that is a very, very important insight that I finally realized. In high school I imagined I was going to be a poet. I was going to be a writer. I was going to be an international journalist. I went to the University of Utah and I got straight A's, but though I still wanted to write, I didn't feel I had anything to say. I don't think that was any accident. I think an education sometimes teaches a person how little they know, and that's a pretty good

basis of humility to push a person to learn more. But beyond that, it was the fact that my experience was not reflected in any way, shape, or form in the kind of literature I read. I think the young women in the 1950s were directed toward public school teaching. I got a teaching certificate, although I never taught because I married young. The writers that we read were male, and I learned a lot; they were wonderful. But I didn't consciously notice that any of this had a shaping impact on my life. I have no doubt that it did, though, because it gave me power to write later about feminist issues. Maybe that is what I meant about history and feminism helping me to discover a new magic in my rural upbringing because it helped me to see the value of ordinary life. The slogan "The personal is political" became a very important feminist slogan of the 1960s and 1970s. Common people's lives became of interest to historians in that period, and although social history and feminist activism are not necessarily soul mates, both have reinforced the value of common experience.

NATHAN: Talk a little about your marriage to Gael and about your family.

LAUREL: I married Gael Ulrich when I was twenty. We have five children. Gael is from Devil's Slide, Utah, so he had a similar magical upbringing in a cement company town. We were married in the Salt Lake Temple. We met at the University of Utah, where he studied chemical engineering. I graduated in June 1960, and we came to Boston the following September so he could do graduate work at MIT. Gael got a job in California. We spent a year there, then came back to Boston. Gael worked in industry in this area until 1970. So we were in the Boston area ten years with the exception of that one year in California. Then he decided to go into teaching, and he took a job at the University of New Hampshire. We lived in Durham, New Hampshire, for the next thirty-plus years.



Gael Ulrich, 2012. Photograph by Morris A. Thurston.

Gael and I have five grown children. Our old-

est daughter, Melinda Chiou, became a graphic designer and currently lives in Southern California. Our youngest daughter, Amy Geary, majored in history, but then she went on and received an MBA and lives in New York. Our son Thatcher lives in New York, our son Karl in Pennsylvania, and our son Nathan in New Hampshire. They are all well-educated, but none of them are historians. Gael's example had a huge impact on our three sons, who are all engineers.

"Writing personal essays helped me work out the contradictions in my life as a wife, mother, teacher, scholar, active churchgoer, and emerging feminist. I needed reassurance that motherhood and religious faith were compatible with intellectual ambitions. We found our answer in history."

LAUREL: The book *Beginner's Boston* was a really successful fund-raising project that the Relief Society in the Cambridge Ward undertook. I think our first edition was in 1967, and then we went on and did another one that came out in 1969 or 1970. It was a fund raising project that we put together collaboratively as a guide to Boston, and it took off and sold way beyond the LDS community. It got attention in the *Boston Globe* and elsewhere. It made a lot of money for the Relief Society and for the local Church welfare fund. But it was an important project because it was an example of how a group of women could work collaboratively using fragments of time and accomplish something significant and that meant something. This group of Church sisters had a changing membership over time as people came and went to attend school and for other reasons. If I'm not mistaken, in 1969 the feminist movement was beginning to get more attention—just stirrings—nobody quite knew what any of this meant. Some of us decided to get together and talk about it. We weren't ever that happy just talking, so we thought of a project and focused our attentions on doing a special issue of *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*. Claudia Bushman and I worked together to co-edit the issue, and that led to a number of other things.

A number of years ago I wrote an essay where I did a timeline, and it was really surprising to me because we thought of ourselves as sort of a marginal cause of this larger movement. Here we are, these Mormon ladies, doing things in the women's movement, and we were really there at the beginning. I think that has been reinforced by some scholarship done by Ann Braude at Harvard Divinity School that religious groups ironically were among the first to really take off in terms of feminist organizations. They are not the ones that got the attention. They were not the radicals and were not out in the street, but they were doing lots of interesting, worthwhile projects. I am really thrilled when I look back to think that our very halting efforts

laid a foundation for some really good things that happened. The feminist movement led me to become interested in history. I had been an English major, but Claudia was in a graduate program in US history and women's history, which was a brand new discipline, and that intrigued me. History was one of the subjects we wanted to discuss in *Dialogue*. We included an essay by Leonard Arrington, and that essay got us interested in Mormon women's history, which eventually led to the publication of the book *Mormon Sisters*, edited by Claudia Bushman. A number of women in the group contributed to it, in addition to some people in Salt Lake and elsewhere. One of our friends discovered a complete run of the *Woman's Exponent* in Widener Library on the open shelves. She checked the volumes out and brought them home, and we used them in our research. Then somebody said, "We ought to start that periodical again," and *Exponent II* grew out of that discovery.

NATHAN: Was there a time when you said, "I am a feminist?"

LAUREL: I think that "feminist" was not a nasty word in 1970. It was a descriptive word. I think in the very first issue of *Exponent II* it says something about the twin platforms of feminism and Mormonism, and so we were comfortable adopting that term. This was before there was a movement to discredit people who used that label.

NATHAN: Did *Exponent II* accomplish what you hoped it would?

LAUREL: It has survived for almost forty years and is bigger and better now. It has both a blog and a full-color magazine that can be accessed on-line or in hard copy. I think *Exponent II* was part of a larger movement in Mormon literature to celebrate the personal essay—the personal voice, and that form survives and flourishes today in many settings.

"I doubt that I would have the courage to begin graduate school without the support of Latter-day Saint women living and dead. I did not choose my field or graduate school; I simply took advantage of the graduate school that was available in a small state university."

LAUREL: Yes, LDS women both living and dead. The living women were those *Exponent* women, my good friends. The dead women were certainly the nineteenth-century Mormon feminists who in wonderful ways validated women's intellectual and professional ambitions.

NATHAN: Is there a certain hero you have in Mormon history?

LAUREL: The hero I have was living at the time, and that was Juanita Brooks. When Claudia and I were working on the *Dialogue* issue, Juanita sent an essay she was working on. It was a wonderful essay about the challenges of motherhood—being a good wife, making the tomato soup, forgetting the baby out by the front bush, and at the same time doing her writing. I just adored

that essay because it resonated so powerfully with my own life and the things I was trying to do. Yet, when we submitted the essay, the editor of *Dialogue* thought it was just terrible and shouldn't be published. It should be more sober, more intellectual. That, to me, was a really perfect example of the way in which female gender changes the way we might evaluate the value of what is written. I doubt if that same person would consider that essay deficient today, but this was at a point where we weren't used to reading that kind of candid, homely, and open expression in a journal.

"Tuition is cheaper than a psychiatrist."

LAUREL: That may have been my husband's quote. We used to laugh about that. He's always been such a wonderful support. I think he often had an ability as an observer to see what made me happy, made me function, an ability that I didn't have. He encouraged me to do those things that made me happy and fulfilled in the course of a day, and he was not hung up on the concept of "roles." I think engineers are often this way. They want to know what works; they don't spend their time agonizing over what should be. They want to experiment and see what really works. And he always had that approach to things.

NATHAN: Was there anyone at the University of New Hampshire who helped you develop the academic and feminist views you possess today?

LAUREL: Other than my husband, I think there were two very important things. Again, friends. In this case, these were not friends who were scholars, or even intellectuals, but friends in the Church who loved and supported me even though I was a little bit different. That was really important, and it also helped me raise my kids in terms of all the service we gave to one another in the Church. We had a wonderful community of friends in that small ward in New Hampshire. A lot of them were military families. Some people came through Pease Air Force base and some through the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard, so we had two military bases. Some of our dearest friends were stationed there and then remained when they retired, so our kids had really good friends in that Portsmouth Ward in New Hampshire. Nobody thought I was violating some principle of Mormonism by pursuing an education, and I had good mentors—male mentors—in the history department. These were wonderful writers and historians who nurtured me. They appreciated that I was a writer, and they were writers themselves and didn't try to force me into some preconceived mode of what historical rhetoric should look like. I also have joked at various points that they didn't have to worry about me because I was a faculty wife. They didn't think that I was going to have a career, so they sort of let me do whatever I wanted. That may be a little jaundiced view

of the world. I learned a lot from Charles Clark and Derick Darrett Rutman in particular.

"My success as a scholar probably had more to do with my need to transcend those time-honored roles."

LAUREL: Here's something—since this is appearing in a Mormon publication— that I think is important. When I started at New Hampshire, in my application essay for the PhD program, I suggested that I was going to work on nineteenth-century Mormon women. That came directly out of the little bit of experience that I had with *Mormon Sisters* and *Exponent*. It became pretty obvious to me pretty fast that that was not a practical idea. I was in New Hampshire at the time—where was I going to get the materials? It was also impractical in that the strength of the history department at UNH at the time was really in colonial history. The first research seminars I took were in colonial history, and I was really captured by it. I think I was captured in part because there were relationships, points of connection—these were religious people and early settlers in a community. They were not Mormons, and believe me they did not think like Mormons. So at the same time there was an element of strangeness and newness that allowed me to step out of the essentially Victorian dilemmas of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Mormonism and really look at something older and different. So, I was less personally engaged in the issues, and I could be, I think, both sympathetic and yet more detached, which is helpful if you are trying to do a project. Having said this, I have to say that I am now beginning a book on nineteenth-century Mormons. I think I needed thirty-eight years, or something, of detachment in order to do that.

NATHAN: What will this recent project of yours on nineteenth-century Mormons entail?

LAUREL: It is going to be a book about Mormon diaries and diarists in the nineteenth century. I am still working it out. In contrast to thirty-five years ago, there are now multitudes of sources in print and online. It's just possible to do it in a way that wouldn't have been possible then. I am also free to travel, and I am not confined like I was when I was raising five kids. So I think the time is right. I also think the time is right because I am old enough; I've done enough, and so who cares. I can do what I want to do. Also, I've lived enough of life, and I think have enough perspective on the Church. There's such wonderful scholarship in LDS history that I feel like I can handle this.

NATHAN: If you were to write an early history of Mormonism, how would it be different from Richard Bushman's or Church Correlation's?

LAUREL: Well, I think Richard Bushman is just fabulous. He has been a long-time friend and really a mentor, as has Claudia. The difference, the

dramatic difference, between what I want to do and what Richard has done is that as a scholar I don't really care about the hierarchy. That is, I am less interested in the visible leaders than in the ordinary people who made things happen.

"I celebrate ordinary, anonymous, forgotten women."

NATHAN: Is that the way you would tell the Mormon history?

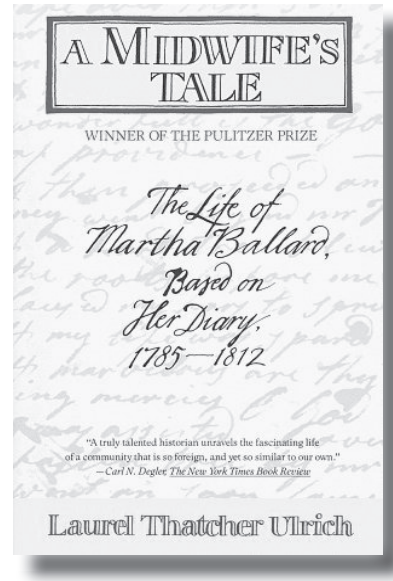
LAUREL: Yes, absolutely—although they are not totally anonymous or forgotten if they are diarists. I am interested in men and women diarists. I've decided to focus on "the source" rather than do some generic social history. This is because to me one of the most absolutely intriguing themes in LDS history is the way in which ordinary people have considered themselves to be creating scripture and to be creating history. That's imbedded in the Church doctrine and in the practice of keeping diaries. I don't think we have looked at that. Because I have worked mostly with non-Mormon sources, I think I might bring a somewhat different perspective to that body of source material than otherwise.

"I was raised to be an industrious housewife and a self-sacrificing and charitable neighbor, but sometime in my thirties I discovered that writing about women's work was a lot more fun than doing it."

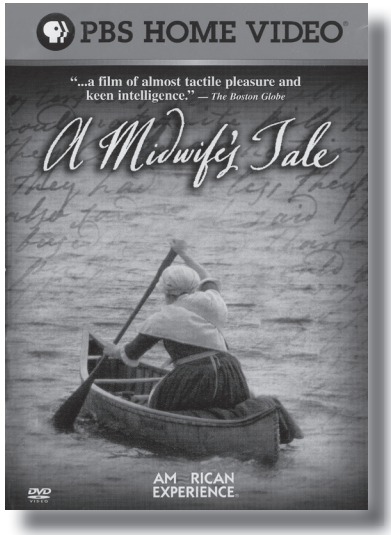
LAUREL: That comment was intentionally ironic. I used to joke that I was going to get just enough education to hire somebody to do my housework because I really hated doing housework. Although as most people do, I have gotten a lot neater as I have gotten older. But I actually do like to cook, and I do like to make things. So it is probably not totally true that I dislike women's work, but I do prefer writing to quilting or whatever.

NATHAN: Devote time to giving a history to ordinary, forgotten anonymous women, and they really give history to you. How did you come to give a history to Martha Ballard, and how did she give a history to you? How did Martha Ballard influence you?

LAUREL: It's important to know that my first book, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650–1750* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), was about women in northern New England in the period 1650–1750. It was written virtually without anything in a woman's hand. I had to write about them through the eyes of other people. So to find this diary—these two very large volumes, twenty-seven years of one woman's life—was very, very moving. It was like having one of my good wives come to life. Because Martha Ballard was born in 1735, she literally



A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785–1812 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990; Vintage Books, 1991). The book received ten national awards, including the Pulitzer Prize for history and the Bancroft Prize in American history, both in 1991. The book has also been translated and published in Swedish, Italian, and Korean.



A Midwife's Tale, docudrama adaptation based on Laurel Thatcher's Ulrich's prize-winning book, produced by PBS as part of the "American Experience" series (1998).

could have been in the first book. She was fifty years old when she started her diary in 1785, but so many of things that she was doing confirmed a lot of what I had speculated about in the earlier book. One of the reasons I organized the book the way I did was to showcase her voice. This is because I felt it was her story, and I didn't want just to be a parasite. I wanted to be a midwife to her story, to help give birth to her story as best I could. I knew that this wouldn't be through editing her diary, however, because it was too taciturn, too difficult, and too remote for most people to appreciate. But I knew that I could understand it because I had done so much work in that period already. I admire people who edit diaries, I really do, but it's just not my talent.

I was obsessed with the diary. I loved the diary. I lived inside that diary for eight years. But I felt nobody else could possibly be that interested. I was trying to write a book that the general reader would appreciate. But I thought my work was probably too detailed and obsessive and that very few people would want to follow me along that path. So I was genuinely surprised, and still am, by its reception. I titled it, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard based on her diary, 1785–1812* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990). The book received a very laudatory review in the *New York Times*, which was unexpected. Almost immediately after that, I was approached by Laurie Kahn-Leavitt, a young filmmaker, who had been looking for a project in early American history, and that led to the PBS film.

NATHAN: The success of the book must have opened up all kinds of opportunities.

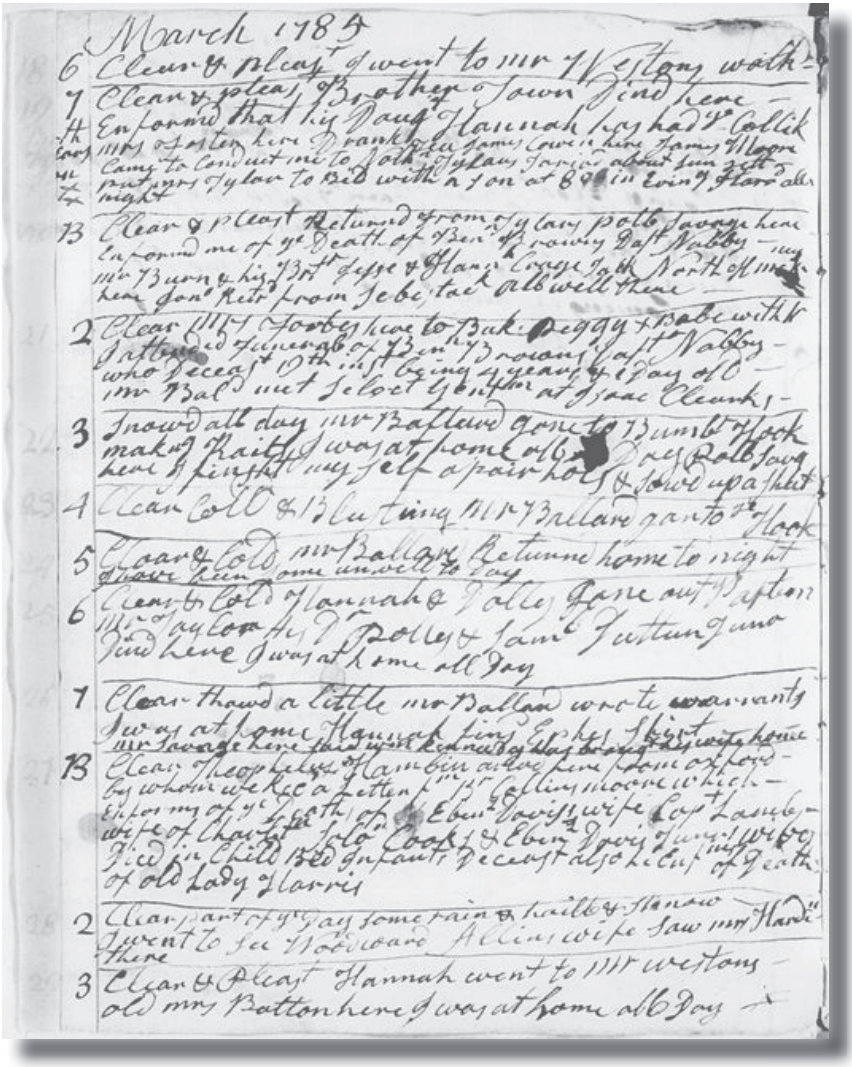
LAUREL: Well, it did, and the Pulitzer did especially. I got an amazing amount of correspondence that I tried to answer, and I was exhausted. It was really, really overwhelming. The Pulitzer was in 1991. So the book came out in the spring of 1990.

NATHAN: Are you still talking about this book to groups?

LAUREL: I try not to. When people say, "I love your book," I know which one they mean.

NATHAN: What can you tell us about *The Age of Homespun*?

LAUREL: *The Age of Homespun: Objects and Stories in the Creation of an American Myth* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001) was not as popular of a book, although it is loved by certain crowds. It was my escape in a very real way from the attention that I got with Martha Ballard. I felt like I really needed to do something very difficult that I didn't know how to do. I wanted to do this so I could get back into that wonderful space that you get into when you are doing very serious intellectual work. So I decided to do this work on material culture, and it was a great joy to work on that book. I joke with my graduate students that I wrote my first book in four years, my second book in eight, and my third book in eleven, I think it was. I say the reason that it got



March 1785

6 Clear & pleas.t I went to mr Westons with —

7 Clear & pleas.t Brother Jown Jined here —
En formd that his Daug.r Hannah Ivy had D. Gollick
mrs of sorts here Frank Pew James Lowell here James Moore
Came to Conduct me to Job Dylans Jarvis about sun sett
put ours & ylor to bed with a ton at 8 o in Evin & Flard all
night

13 Clear & pleas.t Returnd from ys Cary polls Savage here
En formd me of ye Death of Ben.a Crowly Dast Nabby — my
mrs 13 burn & his 13.th Jesse & Hann.h Cowge 7 th North of mine
here gon.e Retr from Jebe tack all well there —

2 Clear mrs Foster here to Bak. Peggy & Babe with h
Intended funerals of 13.en 13 rowns Last Nabby —
who Deceas.d 10.th inst being 4 years 4 days old
mr 13al met Select ymen at Isaac Clarks —

3 Snowd all day mr Ballard gone to 13umb.d Hook
makg Hair I was at home all day Dan.l Rob.son
here & Lingthd my self a pair hose & sowe up a shirt

4 Clear Cold & 13lustring mr 13allard gone to Hook

5 Clear & Cold mr Ballard Returne home to night
Deacon Hen.n come unwell to day

6 Clear & Cold Hannah & Polly gone out Upton
mrs Ayton & Polly & Sam.l Sutton & wife
Jined here I was at home all day

7 Clear Thawd a little mr Ballard wrote warrants
I was at home Hannah Tim.y Eaton here
mr Savage here paid him Ed.d Ilsley Esqr
13 Clear Theophilus Hamblin & Lem.l Come & Love
by whom we Rec.d a Letter from Gelling Moore which
Enformd us of ye Death of Ebn.r Davis wife Lep.y Lamb
wife of Charles Jos.a Cook & Ebn.r Davis Junr 11 Wid.s
Died in Child bed Infants Deceas.d also Decease of
of old Lady Harris

2 Clear part of ys Day some rain & hail & Thaw
I went to see Woodward Allens wife saw mr Hard.n
there

3 Clear & Pleas.t Hannah went to mrs Westons
old mrs Button here I was at home all Day

Page from Martha Ballard's diary, March 1785. Image courtesy Maine State Library, Augusta, Maine.

longer and harder as I went along is that I had more resources. When I came to Harvard, which I did in 1995, I had these amazing libraries, I had research money, I had a MacArthur Fellowship. There is absolutely no stone that I couldn't turn over. Therefore, it took me forever, and in the end I think that book is a classic example of overkill. I just feel like I had so many things I wanted to say and so much material to work with that I'm not sure I held it together. So I really appreciate it when people enjoy it and like it. It is probably best taken in a chapter at time, but it did turn me in a wonderful direction that I have been able to pursue here. I teach a course at Harvard in collaboration with an art historian and curator called "Confronting Objects: Interpreting Culture" because we have these fabulous museums here. We are able to work with really great things, although our argument is that anybody can do this—any object can be the starting point for history. I am still working in that field quite a bit.

NATHAN: Earlier in the interview you said that you would definitely not write about Mormon hierarchy. Why is that?

LAUREL: I just think it's not what I do. It is great when other people do it. The institutional Church is a particular kind of topic. It's sort of like I don't write about the U.S. presidency. I teach a course on the American Revolution, but it's a course wherein we not only look at "founding fathers," but also read a play written by a now forgotten female writer. We work with inventories to see what people had in their households. I am a social historian.

NATHAN: Is that a more accurate form of history?

LAUREL: No, but it's different. And it's important. I think what we all really want to do is to tie those things together. Actually, that's my challenge as I'm working with this Mormon material—trying to see the ways in which common life intersects with institutions and with politics and with ideas. It's hard to integrate these things, but I tend to like to see things from the bottom up rather than from the top down.

NATHAN: Are you a hero, or champion, of the underdog in that you celebrate the significance of the ordinary person?

LAUREL: I think I probably am. I guess I probably celebrated Martha Ballard. This is something one of my colleagues and I have an ongoing argument about. We teach a sophomore class on historical methods, and he says, "You used the word 'heroine' ninety times." I reply, "I've been doing that ironically." Probably celebrate, maybe understand, illuminate, make acceptable, make available.

NATHAN: You have become such an unordinary, well-known figure devoting your life to uncovering those ordinary individuals.

"Does faith and testimony really belong to me? I gradually became aware of immense contradictions within the Church as it struggles to stretch and grow with the times. I resist teachings and practices which diminish women not only because I am a feminist but because I am a Mormon."

NATHAN: Were there hard time periods in your life? When did you overcome those cultural contradictions—the role of women in the Church and your own understanding of the worth of women?

LAUREL: I'm a Thatcher. I grew up in the Thatcher Debating Society, as we like to talk about it. I was raised to think and to discuss—that was part of my upbringing. I will give you an example. If I came home from Sunday School and said, "My teacher said X. Is that right?" My father wouldn't say yes or no. He would say, "Well, let's see what we can find out." He was a teacher. So we would go to the bookcase, we would bring down the books, we would do the research, and then we would talk about it. My mother was the same way. They were thinkers, and I think I was raised in that way. I sometimes say I come from a long line of apostates. I shouldn't say that—it is kind of a joke. My mother is a convert to the Church even though she was descended from Mormon pioneers. Her grandmother left the Church over polygamy, so her father was never a member of the Church. Her mother, my maternal grandmother, was a member of the Church, but my mother wasn't baptized by her family. She joined the Church when she was sixteen, of her own choice, even though she was raised in a mixed Mormon and non-Mormon community in Idaho. She went to high school at Ricks Academy (later Ricks College and now BYU-Idaho). When she went to a public dance, which was against the rules, they refused to give her credit for that semester or something. So her father pulled her out of Ricks and sent her to Idaho Falls to live with her relatives and to attend school. That is where she joined the Church. Ironically, they made her a member of the Church by throwing her out of Ricks Academy. Well, they didn't throw her out, but her father took her out. He felt that was ridiculous and that she was a good person. I should try to track that particular family story down, but it was one of the stories that we heard as kids. And my great-grandfather was a brother of Moses Thatcher, who was famously strong-minded.

I think I grew up with very strong respect for and a very strong commitment to the Church. But I also grew up with an ability to distinguish the fundamentals of the gospel from the behavior of any particular group of individuals or leaders; that is what we learned. I also grew up with tremendous respect for people who weren't Mormons because some of them were my relatives. I never heard my mother denigrate anybody. When my parents moved to Idaho Falls, which is more diverse than Sugar City, I

remember that when my mother had surgery at one point she said I've got the Catholics, the Presbyterians, as well as the members of the Church all praying for me. When my father was in the state legislature in Idaho, he was the one who was the bridge-builder between the LDS and the non-LDS legislators. At least, that is the way I learned to think of him, and I think it was true. I think it was an earned reputation.

Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, 2006. Photograph courtesy Stephanie Mitchell, Harvard staff photographer.

I grew up with a lot of respect for diversity in thinking. At the same time, I grew up with a very strong commitment to the Church because I saw my parents giving their time, talents, and money—tithing, fast-offerings, whatever they had—to the Church. But they were not rigid people, and I think I was very very fortunate to have a wonderful seminary teacher, Ken Brown, who went on to teach at Ricks College. He was somebody who wanted to teach you to how to work things out for yourself rather than lay down the law. Then at the University of Utah, I was there in the golden age of LDS institute when Lowell Bennion was the director of the institute, and T. Edgar Lyon was there. So I came away with a very rich religious education that I am very grateful for. I am a graduate of the institute as well as the university.

NATHAN: What influence did Lowell Bennion's teachings have on you?

LAUREL: When I was a freshman, which was 1956 (two years after Brown v. Board of Education), my memory is that we talked about the black priesthood issue for months. It may have only been two or three weeks, but we did talk about it. Again, he didn't tell us what to think. We went to the scriptures. The returned missionaries were laying down the law about the blood of Cain or being neutral in the pre-existence or whatever they wanted to do. Then he would go back to first principles and get us thinking. The whole emphasis was on our personal behavior and not on changing the Church. I think it was a landmark experience in my life—an increasingly rare one, I would say.

NATHAN: Do you use that as a model for resolving conflict in your experiences in life and the Church?

LAUREL: Absolutely. Two principles are key. One is the story I have written about. One of the first essays I wrote in *Dialogue* was about my grandpa. When he was released as bishop because of a conflict with the stake president, my dad, who was a teenager, said, "Well, I'm not going to go to church if that is the way they treat you." And grandpa said, "Well, listen here"—and I can just hear him saying that because he was such a dynamic, wonderful, strong-minded man—"This isn't Joe Pond's church. This is the Lord's church." So you distinguished between what someone did and what the fundamental principles were. That was important and my father had plenty of opportunities to practice that lesson from his father because of interesting experiences he had as an employee of the Church late in life. After he left the public schools, he directed a BYU adult education center at Ricks College. He had been in the Idaho state senate for eight years, and when he ran for another term his opponent used Dad's affiliation with BYU to somehow question his commitment to the county. Just before the election, President McKay announced that they were moving Ricks College to Idaho Falls. My dad lost the election. He might have been bitter. Instead, I remember him saying, "Someday I am going to see if I can find out why they did that." The move to Idaho Falls didn't go through, but they did move my dad. He supervised the BYU Center in Idaho Falls until he retired. Anyway, I have that family example.

The example from Lowell Bennion comes back to me again and again. Many teachings come back, but one was, "You need to have priorities in religion. Not every word in the Bible is of equal value, and so what are the priorities?" We went through the Articles of Faith. The particular article of faith relating to the black priesthood was of course the one that says we believe that men are punished for their own sins and not for Adam's, or Eve's or Cain's or anybody else's transgression and I think just being able to think "first principles" is a very helpful thing.

"Core values: family, community, democracy, and anti-materialism."

LAUREL: Anti-materialism: I think it's the core teaching of the Book of Mormon and the one we don't talk about very much. We were actually talking about that in my ward on Sunday. Our Sunday school teacher was trying to get us to think about the pride cycle in a really serious way instead of thinking we are being blessed because we are righteous. Of course if you raise five kids on one state university salary you can't be too materialistic. Not that we suffered. We didn't, but I think the Church helps us to see some things matter more than others.

NATHAN: Was there a moment that your testimony was challenged and had to be understood at a different or deeper level?

LAUREL: I had a really really interesting interview last year with an LDS student at the Harvard Divinity School who was talking about crises of faith and how people resolve crises of faith. I think I stumped him a little bit because I challenged the model somewhat: "It seems that you talked about this in a kind of mechanistic way. There is this thing called a testimony"—I used this metaphor—"something that sits on the shelf and shatters because it is 'lusterware' instead of silver." But I thought it helpful to think more organically about growth and change. Consider an organic metaphor. The scriptures are full of them—death and rebirth, the seed falling into the ground and being planted, and the seed falling on barren ground and not taking root. If you go to the Book of Mormon or Isaiah or somewhere else, you find these organic metaphors. By the time you get to be my age, you are kind of a gnarled tree—you have some branches that are strong and some that you have let fall or let go with the wind.

Let me see if I can think of some that will be important to Church history. Well, I used this in the example in my essay on lusterware, but I will mention it again. Particularly, I have just been rereading Richard Bushman's biography of Joseph Smith, and what I think is so remarkable about that biography is that he doesn't try to gloss over ways in which Joseph Smith did not behave well. I think his behavior to his wife was inexcusable, period. You don't lie and do things behind your wife's back because God tells you to. Maybe other people will think that is heretical for me to say. Maybe people will say, "How can you accept him as a prophet if he did something bad?" I guess I would say, "I didn't think we believed anybody was perfect on this earth except Jesus."

NATHAN: Do you think that book could have been written in the 1970s?

LAUREL: No. It's probably Dick's character as a believing, practicing Latter-day Saint that gives him the power to be able to tell the truth. I admire that tremendously.

NATHAN: What are your feelings about the Book of Mormon?

LAUREL: I love some of the new work being done on the Book of Mormon which helps us to read it richly and at multiple levels. I think this is a relatively new gift. I have gotten it from some good Sunday School teachers who were better versed on some of these topics than I was. That's such a contrast to when I was a student, when it was all about archaeology and verifying ruins in Mexico. Now people like Terryl Givens, Jared Hickman, Grant Hardy, and others know it is about understanding narrative, about what it means to be a wanderer, about what it means to be without a country, about what it means to leave home, and about how the Book of Mormon

Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, 2009. In 2009, Laurel received the John F. Kennedy Award from the Massachusetts Historical Association. That same year she also served as president of the American History Association. Photograph by Stephanie Mitchell, Harvard staff photographer.

gives us insights. Let me see if I can think of a really simple example of having to change my belief system because of a confrontation with experience. Certainly having and raising children makes you think very differently about the story of the Fall and the atonement. You think of the paradox of God giving a commandment and having it be part of the plan that Adam and Eve disobey. However, I don't think of God having a pre-established plan that Adam and Eve must disobey; I think about God knowing that this state of immaturity and mortality meant that it was impossible *not* to disobey because you were immature. And He knew there would be an ability to learn from, grow from, and overcome that. In raising children, you look at that story and you can sort of understand what was really going on there—that life is not about taking a manual and following A, B, C, D, E. Life is about an organic growth from immaturity (from a kind of naïve tell-me-what-to-do stage) to a kind of maturity in which you are constantly facing dilemmas and having to resolve them. The only way you grow is by trying to find your way through impossible dilemmas and problems.

NATHAN: What are some of your favorite books? Who are some of your favorite authors?

LAUREL: This is a good one—*The Travels of a T-Shirt in the Global Economy: An Economist Examines the Markets, Power, and Politics of World Trade.* It's really fascinating, and it inspired me tremendously. I would love to be able to do what Pietra Rivoli did, which is to take a single object and not literally follow it but consider its production and where it ends up. How do you start with the raw material cotton and end up with something as common as a t-shirt? Then what happens to the t-shirt when you drop it in a Goodwill bag or give it to the Salvation Army? Where does it go and what does any of this have to do with our economy and with markets and the politics of world trade? I loved that book. The author is an economist, but also an engaging writer, so she explains obscure things like how the government extension service made west Texas the cotton capital of the world and other wonderful stuff.

I love histories of ordinary people, like those by Alfred Young, one titled *Masquerade*, and another titled *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party*. Those are about common, everyday people. I love teaching them. *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party* is about a guy named George Robert Twelves Hewes, a shoemaker who participated in the Boston Tea Party and then became one of the longest surviving veterans of the American Revolution. *Masquerade* is about Deborah Sampson, who went to war as a man. Young's work isn't a celebration of a female soldier; it's how and why this happened and how Sampson lived her life and told her story. It is a very interesting and complex book.

NATHAN: Is it difficult for you to balance time with primary and secondary sources?

LAUREL: Yes. I love the primary research, and I am absolutely enthralled with the work I am doing right now with Mormon diaries. I adore Wilford Woodruff—Wilford Woodruff's bizarre and amazing diaries.

NATHAN: Wilford Woodruff was my wife's great-great-grandfather.

LAUREL: I just think he's remarkable as a diarist. He writes so much, and he is pretty darn open. After a while it becomes Church history because he is very fixated on Brigham Young and the Church and the hierarchal. One of the things that interests me is Woodruff's interest in horticulture and science. He's collecting specimens, which he is sending east. He is constantly grafting fruit trees; he's very involved in the Deseret Manufacturing and Agricultural Society. There is this wonderful section in the diary where he takes this team—I think this is about 1871—to go to visit one of his remote farms. He gets snowed in, and he manages to talk this stationmaster into diverting a train from Evanston to take him and his team back to Ogden. He is so detailed; it is just this fabulous description. But in the diary he forgets his marvelous wife Phebe after awhile, and in fact has very little to say about any

of his wives or about female institutions in Utah, which is why I would never want to write about it alone.

NATHAN: As an advocate of women in the Church and in the world, what advice would you give to women as they seek to live the "whole life?"

LAUREL: I get asked for advice a lot because young women know I have a family and a career. Non-LDS students ask this of me as much or more than LDS students. I usually say, "I've lived a very long time, and I sort of did one and then did the other with some overlap in between. I was forty-two when I finished my PhD and had a child in college before I had a full time job." So I say, "I don't know how relevant that is to your life because I graduated from college in the 1950s, and I was fortunate." It was good timing that I finished my graduate work part time in a field that was brand new, but my graduate students are going into a field that's well developed and very competitive. It is a totally different world. So I cannot tell other people how to live their lives because times change and the world is a different place. I think it is an absolute absurdity, however, to think that you can't have a family and make some kind of contribution beyond your household because women always have. My mother did; she was not a professional woman, and she never had a paying job. In her generation you could make a contribution because of this immense voluntary sector. That has changed.

Women's lives have always been subject to change. My mother had a wringer washing machine, which was a great advance to the hand washing that Martha Ballard did. The home has a history just as society has a history. I made a lot of my kids' clothes—that's how I contributed economically to my family. You literally cannot afford to do that today because fabric costs too much and because clothes made in China or Haiti or wherever those poor women are making our clothes are too cheap. I want my students to see that choices that seem personal are always shaped by larger historical forces. That is a good thing for LDS women as well. We are working hard in our Relief Society to try to get the sisters to really think beyond their own immediate household in terms of the choices that they make. We are not trying to make them into career women; we are trying to help us all be responsible citizens and contribute to the world.

NATHAN: How did your grandfather feel about your mother's conversion?

LAUREL: He told her she would turn yellow. He said, "You can be baptized if you want to, but you'll turn yellow." He was a man of few words. He was never hostile or negative, and he was a good man who did kind things for people. But he did not want to be a member of the Church. He lived in Teton.

Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, 2012. Photograph by Morris A. Thurston.

"A person who believes in equality between the sexes who recognizes discrimination against women and who is willing to works to overcome it. A Mormon feminist believes that these principles are compatible not only with the gospel of Jesus Christ but with the mission of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In 1978 Mormonism and feminism seemed incompatible."

NATHAN: What happened during this time period for you and what your experiences like during this time period?

LAUREL: I think there are good people who are not in the Church because of the Church's participation in preventing the ERA from passing. I do know scholars who work in the field of women's history with whom I occasionally rub shoulders who are sometimes shocked that I am a Mormon

because all they know about the Church is the ERA fight. And I think that's unfortunate.

NATHAN: You must be kind of strange to some of your colleagues.

LAUREL: Yeah. That's right. But not to people who know me.

"Not raised to think that life ended and began at the Ivy League. And that helped your survival."

NATHAN: Were your first few years at Harvard turbulent? And what was that over?

LAUREL: Yes. I began in 1995. I was embraced and welcomed. But then I ended up chairing search committees in a department that is less than ten percent female. It was a lot of work. It was tense, and it was not easy. But we changed the department. I don't mean that I personally did it, but there were very bright, strong people—younger male and female faculty—who were able to fundamentally change the atmosphere of the department. Now a female member of my department is president of Harvard University, and I never would have dreamed in 1995 (and that is not that long ago) that such a thing would have ever happened. She's amazing and well received. So, yes, women's issues were difficult here. But for me another issue is of course the sense of privilege and entitlement that permeates this extremely wealthy, tradition-bound institution. So I was pushing back here a little with our LDSSA president about being inclusive because in the student wards there are students from all kinds of colleges in the greater Boston area and the schools are all fine. You don't have to be at Harvard. I went to the University of Utah, which I think is a fine institution. I went to Simmons College, which is a fine institution that nobody has heard of. I got a PhD from the University of New Hampshire, which is a small state university that is not used to producing faculty for the Ivy League. There were fabulous faculty in each of those institutions, and some of them were as good as those I see here; maybe a few were better. This is not to say that I am not frequently in awe of both my colleagues and students, for there are amazing people here, but it is not the end of the world. A few points on a GRE or an ACT or whatever does not define the ability of somebody to make a difference in the world. I preached that at the University of Utah when I was last there talking to graduate students. Somebody felt I went over the top, and they thought I was encouraging people to think they could do things that they weren't capable of doing. Maybe this person was right. I don't know. I don't know those students. But I think you have to believe in yourself.

"Trusting the spirit of the Priesthood. Mormon women must recognize the potential also for priesthood in themselves."

NATHAN: Explain the difference between the spirit and the form of the priesthood.

LAUREL: I think the priesthood is the power of God to act on earth, or the power delegated to act. It is the power that created the earth. It is the power that permeates the earth. It is the power to act on the earth. It is important to distinguish the power of God from any particular office. That is very clear in the Doctrine and Covenants—the offices are appendages to the priesthood, which I think is interesting. Every office is kind of an auxiliary because the Doctrine and Covenants uses the word "appendage." Sometimes people confuse the power, or spirit, with the person. So when the bishop says, "We thank the priesthood for administering the sacrament," well he means, "We thank the deacons and the priests." They are not the priesthood. We use that term in different ways, and I think the priesthood is a principle of service and a principle of godliness. In D&C section 121 it states that if the priesthood is not exercised under principles of righteousness it no longer exists.

NATHAN: Have you had conflicts with Church authorities? What have you learned from these encounters?

LAUREL: I think the Doctrine and Covenants says if you have a conflict with someone you go to them. I despise the notion that you go over the head of that person and try to get them in trouble. That has happened to me. Somebody doesn't like what I say, and they won't disagree with me to my face, but they will go to a Relief Society president or a bishop and say, "She did 'X.'"

NATHAN: Do you like conflict?

LAUREL: I don't. I don't suffer fools gladly. I am willing to stand up, but on a one-to-one basis. I do tend to get along fairly well with people. I try to be a peacemaker when I can. But because I have always been pretty open about what I think, there is probably a file on me in Salt Lake somewhere.

NATHAN: You think they have a "Laurel Thatcher Ulrich File" in Salt Lake?

LAUREL: I suppose. But that is not something I worry about.

NATHAN: Was the speaking ban at BYU a difficult thing for you personally?

LAUREL: I just thought it was the most ridiculous thing that I had ever heard.

NATHAN: What was it over?

LAUREL: Probably things I had written in *Exponent II*, but I don't know what. Nobody ever told me.

NATHAN: Nobody came to you personally and talked with you about it?

LAUREL: Heavens no! Just the opposite. My stake president and my bishop tried to find out, and they said, "Oh, she's just fine." So I went directly to people at BYU, and they said, "Oh, I wish we could tell you, but we can't." So I just thought it was one of the sillier things BYU did. It was very annoying—because I am still asked about it. I am constantly asked about it. I'm never interviewed by anybody in the non-Mormon press when somebody doesn't bring that up. I always have to say that the ban has been lifted. I don't know why it was there. Somebody maybe thought it was a wise thing because they thought I might be a bad influence on students there. But it certainly did not hurt me personally. In terms of ecclesiastical sanctions, I have not experienced any. Because I have not experienced them maybe I am a little too patient. I know other people who have experienced them, and maybe we should all stand up. I do stand up—frequently at a local level and in the privacy of interviews. Person to person seems to be the way to go, a more effective way to operate than using the press.

"When I feel like I have to be all things to all people, which is certainly the way I was raised, I say, 'Hey, well behaved women seldom make history. I am going to have to disappoint someone. I am going to have to misbehave here.'"

LAUREL: I wish I could really learn that lesson. What has happened is that we have lost a lot of really wonderful young people, including some of my own children who could not handle the extremely conservative approach. I think I am wedded to the Church. I have faith in the gospel. I adore the Church and serving in the Church. It's a core and center of my life experience, and the older I get the more I think that it is important to focus on those core values again—to serve and care about others, to exercise charity. As I read the scriptures, I see that many of the most powerful statements are directed against the true believers—the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Nephites. Those who have the most reason to be righteous sometimes lose their way. So I come back to things that I learned in college, to that phrase I think I quote in "Lusterware" about the weightier matters of the gospel, which are forgiveness, mercy, love unfeigned, justice, and caring about other people. I love Lowell Bennion's statement that you can learn to be a Christian in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It's kind of a paradoxical statement, but if that is your primary objective then I can think of no better place than the Church to try to practice those Christian virtues and try to live a good life. This doesn't mean, and I will say this openly, that I think the Church is the

only place that you can do that. Absolutely not! But it's a wonderful place, and I am a defender of the Church in most circumstances. Not in all, but in most circumstances I am.

"To care enough about the Church to want to see it better. To cherish the past without denying the future; To love and respect the brethren while recognizing their limitations. To be willing to speak when nobody is listening. All of these require faith."

LAUREL: It is easier when you don't live in the geographical core of the Church because in areas where there are few Latter-day Saints you are needed. I think this is something Clayton Christensen has talked about a lot in terms of what happens in small units of the Church. In these units, when you reach out, wonderful things happen as people grow and learn to serve in the Church. That is one of the things that I loved about New Hampshire; we had such a diversity of membership, and it was true of Cambridge in the 1960s; it's less true now. We have grown so much. My husband is the ward clerk, and he said we might have to divide this ward again. I said, "Oh, no!" What do you do if you have a ward just overflowing with extremely bright graduate students and young professionals and with very few children and no teenagers? You have a limited number of callings needed, and nineteen people who could fill any calling very well. I think that means it is time to think up some new callings that might have to do with nonmembers. And that is some of what we are trying.

"History is a way of making sense out of the present. Serious history is always been forged in the tumult of change. Good history is always a little dangerous."

NATHAN: This is from Sam Wineburg in *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts*. How might we embrace that which we share with the past yet remain open to aspects that might startle us into reconsidering what it might mean to be human or Mormon?" What has history done for you or meant to you? How does history change or challenge you?

LAUREL: I guess I'll comment on what intrigues me about my current project, and that is the mystery of what it meant to be Mormon in the nineteenth century. As I work with those nineteenth-century diaries (and I am trying very hard to stay with day-to-day diaries and not go to retrospective accounts and memoirs; although those are very rich, they are different). Some of the ways people express their experience feels incredibly familiar. So I feel like, "Oh, yeah, I know what they're talking about." Some of it feels so odd that I just

can't imagine that we are on the same planet. I think that is what Wineburg is talking about—that history is a foreign country. You are going to recognize a lot even in a very foreign country, and there is lot that is going to repel you and startle you and that you can't put into your framework and way of thinking. To me that is the most important thing about historical study—that it jars us in those ways and forces us to think. What we want to have happen is not just to say, "Wow, that's weird," which I've been saying a lot lately. "Wow, that's weird." But then you want to say, "Why can't I understand that? What is it about my world and their world that is so different?" And when you start to ask that, then you are talking about change. If you can start to do that, you are in a mode to begin to explore historical change. Nothing is more interesting in the world than how things change. And the question is, "Are you having an impact on that?" It's kind of like global warming. Is it something working itself out in the laws of the universe? Or does my light bulb have something to do with this? Well, it's probably both, and figuring out when your light bulb makes a difference is what it means to be a moral person, I think.

NATHAN: Thank you for these reflections and your time.