

Mormon Stories Podcast Part 2 with John Dehlin
321-322: Denver Snuffer
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John Dehlin: Denver, I think we got a good sense for your high level summary view of how you view the restoration. Let's, at a high level, about from Brigham to now, and if you could give just a high level how you see the Church evolve, and when you started seeing some of the influences and policies being introduced that may have been important contributors to the mess maybe we're in now. I would love to hear you talk about it. You've talked about four phases, or something like that. I don't know if that's the right framing for this question but hopefully get a sense for what I'm asking.

Denver Snuffer: The second phase of Mormonism began at the death of Joseph Smith and it lasted – the second phase we clarified a bunch of problems including what do we do now that both Joseph and Hyrum are dead, and how do we perpetuate the institution in an existence that will allow it to survive, we figured that out. But the second phase largely is defined by the plural marriage issue. It ends when the practice of plural marriage ends publicly in 1890 and then privately in 1904 with the second letter of President Joseph F. Smith actually ending the practice. The third phase of Mormonism...

[crosstalk]

John: Wait, what was it about that phase that was important or distinctive for you?

Denver: In that second phase of Mormonism, what the Church was really trying to do was to preserve what it was that Joseph had handed, and then to live it no matter the hazard, live what it was that Joseph had handed down.

John: What they thought he had handed down, right?

Denver: Correct, and they became quite militant about that. The idea was that if God originated this work that all they needed to do was to show enough fidelity to it and then God would come out of his hiding place and protect it. The militancy about that, and then I think the single most challenging doctrine, was the one that Brigham Young chose to use as the whipping post to get everyone into line on, and that was the plural marriage doctrine. If you can live that then you can be approved of God because you're sacrificing so much to make this work. The enormity of the sacrifices that were involved in trying to make that work, I don't think they can be overstated. People that have gone back and done very good work – Todd Compton and others that have written in the area – show you this was a very difficult practice, and there was no reason to engage in this kind of stuff except out of a religious conviction. The women in particular, who tried to make that system work, who bore children and who raised them under that system – I don't care if you think that they were completely mistaken – there is a nobility and a self sacrifice and a self discipline about that that you really have to respect despite the fact that I don't think they should have been doing that, and it dominated the landscape.

When you get to the end and you begin to look at how we managed to extract ourselves, it was a political compromise with the United States, pure and simple. There wasn't a revelation to end

the practice. In fact, when you read the private journals of those who were involved, the idea that they would renounce it temporarily and get statehood was what they started with. They made incremental compromises along the way, and in the final moment when plural marriage ends, it's really a moment that occurs with an attorney preparing President Wilford Woodruff to testify before the special master regarding the property belonging to the Church that the federal legislation had taken away and the guidance that the lawyer gave on how the questions ought to be answered. Wilford Woodruff goes off then, he testifies in court, and when he comes back you read in the journals – they are all saying in a kind of horrified recognition that now that he's testified that way we really have ended the practice. It's not coming back. And that wasn't where they set off to get. It was a series of pressures brought about upon the Church and it ended. The horrified reaction of those who were critical because they'd sacrificed so much lead President Woodruff then to claim that he wouldn't be doing it if it hadn't been approved by the Lord. Then the legacy of that comment becomes the notion that the president of the Church can never lead the Church astray.

The thing that is most important as I look at that second phase is really what happens when it finally turns and we step into the third phase, because the third phase not only changes the...

John: Wait. Denver, let me just jump in for a second. So what I heard you say from the beginning was that maybe it wasn't even God's will that the practice of polygamy even persists past Joseph.

Denver: Certainly not widespread, certainly not in the form that it assumed, and certainly not for the reasons that Brigham taught.

John: And so the foundations of this second phase, which is protecting and defending polygamy, you're saying maybe that whole thing was on a faulty premise.

Denver: I'm saying that it was a wildly enthusiastic overstatement of what it was that Joseph was doing. Joseph's purpose behind plural marriage and the limitations are spelled out in the second portion of D&C Section 132. His behavior and his practice was far more limited in scope than what it became in the second phase of Mormonism. I think ultimately for salvation and the realization of the highest blessings Section 132 doesn't even support doctrinally the idea that it is mandatory. That is a second phase teaching: to be saved you must have celestial marriage, and the definition of celestial marriage is not a man and a woman, it is *a man and women*—plural. And yet Section 132 is phrased in the singular, “a wife”, “a wife”, “a wife”.

John: So since God never intended it, of course it is going to be a legalistic, lawyerly thing that it gets taken away, right?

Denver: Yes, the Church got taken on by Washington and then Washington won. And in the process of winning, we became not just American, we became *uber* American [laughs]. We have been proving our bona fides ever since then.

John: Okay, so third phase then.

Denver: The most important tool to Mormonism in the third phase became the idea that you can renounce a central doctrine, a doctrine that you say is essential to exaltation. Not only can you abandon that but you can abandon it and renounce it. And not only abandon and renounce it, but I can excommunicate you for what was before essential to your salvation. Now I can excommunicate you for continuing the practice. What that does to Mormonism is so fundamental, so radical, so far reaching, that that allows Mormonism – from that moment in the institutional Church – it can become anything. There are no limits. It is completely unanchored. Because if, as the second phase emphasized, you can't get to heaven without it, and in the third phase I can excommunicate you if you do it, then Mormonism has now assumed a flexible standard, a dimension of capacity to change, and not just change but reverse, and not just change and reverse but to militantly do so, consigning you to hell for doing what used to be required for your salvation – well, now the possibilities are endless and unanchored. It is radical beyond radical.

John: You are saying endlessly potentially terrible, right?

Denver: I'm saying we don't wind up where we are today unless you make that transition. That enables the metamorphosis without bounds of Mormonism. It's unchecked at this point.

John: So you are not a big fond of the innovation. I'm just trying to summarize. You're not a big friend or fan of the decline of what Joseph brought us and the reinterpretations of it. You're not a big fan of sort of the resoluteness with which the early prophets and leaders clung to those false interpretations. You're not a big fan of the way that they have assured us that they'll never lead us astray. And you are certainly not a fan of what they've started to do, which is to punish and excommunicate people who counter their authority, right?

Denver: I would agree with most of that. I might phrase it differently but we're quibbling. Here is the point that... Let's assume that I am right about the errancy of the second phase practice of plural wives, okay?

John: Okay.

Denver: Why would I ever excommunicate someone who sincerely believes that their salvation is dependent upon having a plural wife? I disagree with that, I think differently, but they sincerely believe it, so much so that they are willing – both the man and his women – to undergo the pain, the sacrifice, the difficulty, and the strangeness of that kind of a marital union. Why would I excommunicate them? Why wouldn't I fellowship with them, invite them to my sacrament meeting, preach to them, let them preach to me, and see if we can't together reason our way through this gulf of understanding between where they are and where I am. I don't know that we need the kind of intolerance and militancy of saying now that we've changed our view other views are anathema. We're going to consign you – assuming we possess the power to do so – to hell because we are going to excommunicate you. Why not instead say, "The history of this is pretty checkered, the events as they unfolded were pretty ugly. Let's get together and let's talk it through." Now I know why we didn't do it initially, because you read the Reed Smoot senate confirmation hearings and you know what a hot button issue that was, and the Church did react the way that it reacted in order to preserve its credibility in the American

public's mind. Nevertheless, I don't think the American public's mind would be scandalized if fundamentalist Mormons were told, "You can return and attend church. We're going to preach against you, we're going to disagree with you, we're going to try and reclaim you, but you're welcome to come and you're welcome to participate, and you're welcome to be among us." I know there are those who say we can't do that because as soon as you do that then their poison will spread, but look – someone's got a better view, and if we study it all out and we share the information that everyone thinks is relevant on the topic, and we come to a consensus to disagree with one another, then why don't we be friendly about our disagreement and tolerate one another's presence and say, "We just will never agree on that point but let's move on."

There are people who do fellowship who don't think the Book of Mormon is a historic document. I happen to think it is. But their skepticism over its historicity does not affect my conviction about its historicity, and we can have intelligent conversations and share a faithful retelling of morality evidenced in the book without agreeing about its basic historicity. Why is that important?

John: So you are calling for a more, not only just inclusive, but sort of a bold brand of Mormonism that isn't so scared, that isn't so afraid to be inclusive and have open dialogue and to even support disagreement or debate, but a robust discourse within the walls of the Church, right?

Denver: Yes. In fact, that statement that we quote, about "*giving apostles and prophets... that we all may come to the unity of the faith*", that Paul wrote, that statement is not so that in a police state we can cast away those with whom we have disagreements. That is a statement about persuasion. That is a statement about preaching and coming to a unity of faith through a lively exchange of discussion, preaching, exhorting, expounding, until we all say, "Okay, I've heard enough now to make my mind up and I'm on board with..." or, "I haven't heard enough, I disagree with, I still retain this view," but you know what, someone who walks in, who has a different view than me, if I listen to them they will either persuade me that I have left something out of the equation I need to think about, or they will raise questions in my mind that will send me back to looking and studying and trying to come to peace with the issue. But what I shouldn't do, in my view, is to say, "Wait a minute, you're saying something I disagree with. Get away from me. You are toxic. Get away from me. My mind must be protected from what you have to say." But again, this goes all the way back to that beginning when I said I came into the faith from a polemical environment. I'm okay with the fact that people I love and respect – my own mother, my own sister – think my religion utterly false and worse than that, corrupt.

John: Have you talked about the fourth phase yet?

Denver: I've not. [laughs]

John: So the third phase is punishing dissenters, right?

Denver: The third phase opens up the possibility that Mormonism can now morph into anything. It does not have an anchored center including the highest – at that point they preached in the second phase the highest salvific union was the plural marriage. We're going right to the

core of that, we're tearing it out, we're throwing it away, we're looking at it lying there on the floor and we're saying, "Anyone that wants to stand on that ground with that principle is excommunicated." That is an enormous; that moment in the history of Mormonism is as profound a deviation from where it began as the death of Joseph Smith represented in the first instance.

John: I'm torn with that. On the one hand I read Joseph as being very inclusive, very expansive, I guess inclusive would be repetitive. [crosstalk 18:29] On the other hand let's be honest. He was the guy who excommunicated Oliver Cowdery when Oliver Cowdery accused him of doing some improprieties. He was the one who told Hiram Page, or whoever it was, "Oh, no, no, that seering that you're doing, you can't. I'm the one who's in charge of the Church and you can't go be doing that if it contradicts what I have to say." And so I kind of feel like both the expansiveness and inclusiveness and the attempts at censuring are both rooted in Joseph, aren't they?

Denver: You have to go back to what was going on contemporaneous with the events involving John Page and the revelations themselves of John [Hiram] Page. Joseph Smith welcomed the revelations of others. He recorded in his own history. You go to the Joseph Smith papers and he's celebrating the fact that other people are having these spiritual experiences. He's retelling other's spiritual experiences with the kind of enthusiasm that some people repeat testimonies heard by people today, when they think that there's been some great spiritual manifestation. Joseph was just like that. But in the case of John [Hiram] Page, what John [Hiram] Page was doing had false doctrinal significance. In fact, there's an incident, and I have a friend who very, very much disagrees with me about this incident, but if you'll indulge me for a moment. There's an incident that occurs that I think has some real significance.

This is Lehi in the 8th chapter of First Nephi talking about a spiritual experience that Lehi had. Lehi encounters this man dressed in a white robe (1 Nephi 8:5). There's a man in a white robe, and he follows him, he follows this man. He bid him to follow him and he followed him. So Lehi follows him. And then he travels for the space of many hours in darkness, and while he is in darkness he begins to pray. It's not until he's followed a man in a white robe, he's gone into a dark place, and he's been there for hours that he begins to pray, and he's lead out of that and he has this great theophony.

Joseph Smith, in his First Vision experience, replicates something that you can read about in that "hearken all ye people" recreation of the shouting Methodist tradition. The shouting Methodists were trying to get bound. They were trying to go out and have an encounter where they were bound up and they couldn't move, and they couldn't speak, and Joseph went through that. That was an authentic shouting Methodist experience. Except, like Lehi, he then pressed through the experience to find the theophony. Joseph did not allow himself to merely have a spiritual experience, he pushed through to the authentic encounter with God just like Lehi did. What the John Page experience represents in the first part of that, which is the spiritual deception, and not the second part of pressing through to find the authentic presence of God. Just like Moses on the mountain encounters Satan, who wants him to worship him, and Moses on the mountain presses through that and says, "I've been in the presence of God. You're darkness. This isn't

authentic,” and he winds up frightened, confronted, and in combat. John [Hiram] Page illustrates...

John: Is it Hiram Page or John Page?

Denver. Excuse me, yes.

John: Just making sure.

Denver: That incident with the false stone, with the false spirit, with the false doctrine doesn't represent militancy against authentic revelation. It represents militancy against someone getting false revelation and then stepping forward and saying, "I'm in charge. I'm going to lead people in the way that I'm going to lead them."

In fact, you go back to all of the revelations concerning Joseph Smith and a big question still in my mind, neither raised nor answered about Mormonism, is this question: Do all of the statements of limitation of Joseph's prerogative to reveal get immediately transferred to his successor in office, or are those statements exclusive to Joseph? That is, Joseph Smith is the one whose words you give heed to. I don't care who follows in an office, whoever follows in the office can't change what Joseph received. Or instead does it mean Joseph Smith, or the fungible office in which Joseph found himself, is the one you must give heed to. That question in Mormonism is presumed to have already been answered and the answer is presumed to be that it is fungibility. Joseph Smith does not equal "the person" Joseph Smith. Joseph Smith equals "the office" he held. Therefore, anyone that walks in possessing the same office gets that same prerogative. That is not clear in my mind. That is a leap that we have made that I'm not satisfied was an appropriate leap to have made – a prophet, a seer, and a revelator in the form of Joseph Smith, and an office holder whose title is, by virtue of the office they hold, prophet, seer, and revelator. Unquestionably, inside the institutional Church has the absolute authority and prerogative of that office. They are the ones that control the tithing budgets. They are the ones that staff the church. And they alone can organize stakes. They alone can conduct the affairs of the Church, and no one else has that right to step in because the common consent has put them in that position. Does that mean that they have the unfettered discretion that Joseph Smith unquestionably held because he actually spoke with and for God, to have all their words heeded in the same like fashion? Or are they under the same obligation as me and you and anyone else to say, "We better give pretty strict heed to what it was the Joseph Smith restored, and we better be awfully careful about deviating from what it was that came from him, because he was the one through whom the Lord restored this." It's like saying, does the high priest Caiaphas, who sits in Moses' seat, as Christ acknowledged, and was entitled to our respect because he sits in Moses' seat – does Caiaphas have the right to go back and rewrite Leviticus, to rewrite and amend Exodus... Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomists and the later tradition in the second temple period –we're in the middle of Margaret Barker now. The fact is that you would never say that Caiaphas is Moses' equal. You would never say Moses yields the floor when Caiaphas speaks. You would say, "Caiaphas, you've deviated from what Moses said, get back in line." Despite the fact that Jesus gave homage to the high priest of their day, and we are obligated in like manner to give homage to the authorities that are set in the Church. Do they have the prerogative to claim what Joseph claimed, to change what Joseph said, to demand co-equal

authority with? That question we think we've resolved but I'm not sure we've even adequately asked it yet, much less kicked it around in a wholesome open environment to reach a conclusion about it.

John: You are saying what Joseph did with Hiram Page wasn't because he didn't want to keep inviting others to have a similar experience as his, it wasn't even necessarily an authority play, it was more his denunciation of what he didn't see as an authentic interaction with the divine.

Denver: Once you get into spiritual experiences, not every spiritual experience is from God. There are spiritual experiences that come from a place of darkness. Joseph Smith demonstrated a capacity to distinguish between the two in the experience he had in the First Vision. He demonstrates it again in Section 128 when, in his letter, he says that Michael detected the devil when he appeared as an angel of light in the wilderness; that's just a passing reference to it. He demonstrates it again in Section 76, when in the vision of God the Father, and the Son, and the throne theophony that is set out in Section 76, he also talks about outer darkness. Time and time again there is the contrast, the authentic spiritual experience, the one that gets through to God, invariably tempers you through darkness. There must be exposure. You have to know the difference between the light and the truth and the darkness and the false.

Joseph and Moses and Enoch and Sidney Rigdon in Section 76 – all of the experiences that take you beyond this veil and get you ultimately to a throne theophony, for example, will invariably take you through a place of darkness and deceit and despair and deception. One of the reasons Joseph made the comment that you can fall victim to spirits in the coming world if you don't have enough knowledge is directly related to the ability of false spirits to mislead and deceive. Part of the authentic, part of the experience of Lehi in seeing the man dressed in white, and being lead into a dark place, is every man. We can't just say spiritual encounters invariably equal authentic access to the divine because some of those are authentic experiences, but they are with the darkness, the deceiver, the trickster, the one who will deceive and ultimately destroy.

John: Joseph did excommunicate a lot of people, right?

Denver: Yes. But watch how quickly some people got reinstated when they got – and what were they excommunicated for? We have people hailed up in the highest councils of the Church for adultery, who when they are getting ready to excommunicate them because of adultery, they confessed their sin and they say, "Okay, you confessed your sin, you're forsaking it, you're confessing it, let's move on." They don't excommunicate them. Some people reach a point where they're excommunicated and then how quickly are they reinstated? How much effort was required in order for them to repent and return, even members at the highest level, including the Quorum of the Twelve, who got thrown out. Succession in Brigham Young's case was affected by the Pratt brother departure and return. How forgiving, how quick to forgive was Joseph. How tolerant was he of the returning sinner, the one who said, "I'd like to put it behind me." He was quick to forgive.

There's that incident with W. W. Phelps and the "friends at first, are friends at last" poignant moment. Joseph was put through hell and he weathered it rather well, I think [laughs]. He was a broad-minded man. In fact, his confession, "If I hadn't lived this I don't know that I would have

believed it if someone else was telling me,” that comes from a place of tolerance, acceptance, and realism because Joseph’s being authentic when he says that. He wouldn’t blame us if we don’t believe him, and that to me is the sign of someone telling you the truth.

John: This is just a total aside; I don’t want to spend more than 30 seconds on it. But do you see Joseph as being capable of even bad or terrible things, like some would say the polyandry, the sending these men on missions while he propositioned their wife, or pressuring these young girls with their salvation, or even what he wrote in [Section] 132 with Emma. Do you see it possible that Joseph was both inspired and potentially capable of even really bad things?

Denver: I think Joseph was capable of really stupid things. I think he did some boneheaded stuff. But I think, at his heart, that Joseph was trying to cope with things in a way that he was trying to understand them as he went along. Some of the things are astonishingly stupid. It would be really interesting to have a chance to discuss with him what he learned from some of the experimentation that went on. I don’t think that he ever figured out what to do with the notion of the plural wives, and I think that was as poorly executed and as befuddling a proposition as ever confronted a man, and I would fault him for some pretty dumb things. But I don’t know that even in his dumbest moments that I would attribute malevolence to him, because his explanation and the way he acquits himself I’ll give him the benefit of the doubt on, where I can. Where I come down on a lot of things are that he did some stupid things.

John: I want to quickly talk about the fourth era and then get into the Church today, and where we go forward. What’s the fourth phase about?

Denver: It’s the modern Church. It’s the growing Church. It’s the centrally correlated Church. It’s the culted personality around the presiding president of the church. It’s a distinct phase.

The presidency of Heber J. Grant was unpopular. He was one of the least liked presidents of the Church. The David O. McKay administration targeted the problem of getting the Church on board with where the leadership wanted to take it, and the solution was one of the hallmarks of fourth phase Mormonism, the culted personality or the immediate identification of a living prophet. As soon as you use the words, “a living prophet,” disagreement with someone that you hold in that regard becomes heresy, apostasy, you’re really threatening your own salvation if you differ from that position, whereas, in the first three phases of Mormonism when you use the word “prophet,” the word prophet meant Joseph, or it meant the prophet Joseph Smith. It was President Young, it was President Taylor, it was President Woodruff. No one viewed themselves as being Joseph’s equal and the phrase, “prophets, seers, and revelators” were connected with the office. The idea of a living prophet in the sense that it has manifest itself today is a real fourth phase, culted personality development.

I walk through the difference between the general conference comments made in the sustaining of, I believe it was Joseph F. Smith in general conference, and Thomas S. Monson in general conference. When the one was sustained the comments were like this: “I know this guy. He’s a man of his word. He’s told us what he’s going to do and I believe he’ll do it.” In fourth phase Mormonism it’s words like, “Mighty prophet of God.” The quotes are all there in *Passing the Heavenly Gift*. The contrasts between the two are really quite profound. What that enables

fourth phase Mormonism to do, now that we've been through the third phase, which means that Mormonism can redefine itself as anything including denouncing prior practice as excommunicatable heresy – fourth phase Mormonism now wants and has achieved central command and control through the correlation process and therefore, when resistance to the central planning is resistance to the living prophet, fourth phase Mormonism can command and control from the center of the hierarchy all of the far-flung Mormon interests. Even your own thinking can be challenged, that your thinking isn't in harmony with the living oracle. One of the oddities about all that is that credit is given to David O. McKay for accomplishing the correlation department when, in fact, David O. McKay was saying that the correlated Church, in the way that was envisioned by Harold B. Lee, would ultimately lead to the Church's apostasy. And yet when Harold B. Lee defended the correlation program he gave credit for it, the inspiration for it, to the very man, David O. McKay, who thought it was troubling and potentially damaging and leading to the apostasy of the Church.

So the fourth phase is really the modern church, and it's an interesting amalgamation that requires all of this prior history in order to see the flowing current. The fourth phase of Mormonism has the confidence now, and has the discipline established within the Church, that they can go back and make dramatic changes to the temple ordinances that were, at one time, thought to be unchangeable, eternal, and salvific, and people say, "Well, it's a living prophet, it must be right." All resistance to the change is overcome by that.

At this point fourth phase Mormonism really is whatever the person at the top wants to redefine it as. It can be anything. It can become more evangelical, more Catholic, more American, more international, more whatever it needs to be, and they've harnessed the power of the social sciences to gather the social data that allows them to follow trends and conform with trends. Mormonism is ambidextrous. It's nimble, and it's centrally planned and it will bear progressively less resemblance to what it was that it started with, with Joseph.

John: This reminds me of Paul Toscano. It reminds me of Hugh Nibley. It reminds me of – I'll just say it – I'll say critics of the Church, yet you are a member of the Church. You serve in callings, and you're part of this institution. How do you do it? How do you view the Church as almost – I don't know if you would go as far as to say it's gone into apostasy – but how can you stay a member and yet view the Church as if it's gone in this direction?

Denver: Christ gave his Bread of Life talk and a lot of people thought he had gone way too far at that point and everyone started peeling off. Christ turned to the apostles and said, "Are you guys going to leave me too?" and Peter said, "Where else can we go? You're the one who has..."

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has a mechanism in the form of common consent that puts men in positions that were originally established through Joseph Smith. No matter what else we have done or not done we have the obligation to go out and teach the Book of Mormon, and to worship, gather together, mourn with those that mourn, bear one another's burdens. It's an opportunity to serve. The Church believes the Book of Mormon, at least it prints it and it distributes it, and it publishes the revelations of Joseph Smith, and it is a place for fellowship. So far it has been willing to allow those that want to search deeply into the history of the Church and the teachings of Joseph to do that and to tolerate their presence. Until they decide that it's no

longer welcoming to people that want to look into and consider carefully the history and the teachings, I don't see any reason to run off. I certainly don't think that I have any right to manage the Church. No one's sustained me. Everyone has sustained President Monson; well, everyone in the Church that votes in General Conference, that's the place where the votes are taken, and in our Stake Conferences. These guys – just as Christ was deferential to Caiaphas, how can we not be deferential? If Christ can put up with Caiaphas in the chief seat and say, "He sits in Moses' seat, show him respect." Tom Monson, and the brethren and the leaders of the Church, and the people who preside are a whole lot better than Caiaphas. These are good, decent men whose lives are lived on stage. They are doing a difficult job in a difficult era. They were handed a tradition. How can they see outside of the tradition inside of which they grew up?

That series I'm putting up on the blog about interpreting history, I have sympathy for people who grew up LDS. To a lot of people who are conditioned, traditional Mormons, the kinds of things I am willing to think about would be painfully agonizing for them to even consider. I get it, I understand why they plug their ears and they start shouting, "No, no, tell me no more." I get that and I'm sympathetic with that. But I can tell you that if I were to take my views of Mormonism and the restoration and Joseph Smith, and go sit in a Catholic church or a Baptist church or a Lutheran church, they'd have no use for me there, and I don't want to go sit in a Fundamentalist group because I don't have any use for that practice, though I'd be happy to talk to them about it. Where else are you going to go?

The Church has a commission. It was divinely ordained, and I think when God picks up the thread again and begins to move humanity forward, the place at which He will pick that thread up to run with it is going to be the very place where He last was working with humanity, and in my view that is going to be at or very near the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

John: Or at least in harmony with the impulses of its founding, right?

Denver: Sure, yes. The Book of Mormon foretells latter-day malaise and the Doctrine and Covenants predict a later reformation. We are not forgotten. God's hand is going to be I think once again fairly evident, and so why would you go somewhere else? Stay around, the show's going to get better, far more interesting.

John: That's fascinating. I don't want to end but time is escaping from us. I want to end thanking you for joining us. I want to end encouraging everyone to check out your blog and your books. Again, DenverSnuffer.blogspot.com.

One of the things that people asked me to interview you about was what we've already alluded to, which is the belief that man – the bold belief that Joseph started with, that you're now sort of encouraging, and interestingly enough, I don't hear this encouraged as much at church. Can you talk to us about whatever you're comfortable sharing about your own experiences with the divine, and how someone who... In my case I've prayed to ask if the Book of Mormon is true. I couldn't even get the burning in the bosom I was expecting to get, let alone a visitation from an angel or Christ Himself. So can you, A) Tell us whatever you can about your own experiences and, B) Tell those of us who would still be open and interested in having that type of experience

how we could achieve it, even though we're in an age of increasing secularism, agnosticism, and atheism; give us a case for why we should even try and, if so, how it can happen.

Denver: It took 170,000 words in the book, *The Second Comforter: Conversing with the Lord*, to lay the entire plan out and I would commend that book to you.

Let me just tell a little vignette experience dealing with the topic of the Second Comforter. I have a friend. He's a former stake president, a former mission president, who had an occasion to be alone with Mark E. Peterson, the member of the Quorum of the Twelve who was considered *the* doctrinal authority in his day. It was Mark E. Peterson who was asked to identify all the errors Bruce R. McConkie made in *Mormon Doctrine*. This was the doctrinal go-to man. My friend had a chance to be alone with him. While alone with him in a private conversation that he repeated to me, he said that he raised the topic of the Second Comforter with Elder Peterson. And Elder Peterson's response to the inquiry about the Second Comforter was this: "Jesus was sent to the lost tribes of Israel. He was not sent to the gentiles. The gentiles are supposed to be converted through the records of the children of Israel. I, (this is Elder Peterson speaking) am a gentile apostle to a gentile church, and the Second Comforter isn't available to me." Now, after my friend told me the story he said, "What is your response to that statement?" and I said, "Oh, I would have said, 'Elder Peterson, in 1 Nephi 14:1 it says that *if the gentiles shall hearken to the Lamb of God in that day*, (that is, when the Book of Mormon comes forth) *He will manifest Himself to unto them, in word, and in power, and in very deed*'." The limitation in 3 Nephi was not a limitation on gentile access to the Lord. It was a limitation on the Lord's immediate post resurrection ministry to go and visit with organized bodies of the children of Israel scattered throughout the globe. Nephi's prophecy about our day is saying that the purpose of the Lord in our day is to manifest Himself in very deed.

I do not believe there is anything extraordinary about me, period. In fact, I would say when it comes to basic human goodness and decency, since I am acquainted with all of the mistakes that I have made over the course of a lifetime, my guess is you, John, and your listeners, and most of the people I know, and everyone in my ward practically, are better people than me.

John: You're not saying that just to be false modest, right?

Denver: No, I'm not. I'm saying if I have to evaluate myself on a goodness meter I am as wretched a man as you will ever meet. I practice law. I deal with people's fights. I have not lived a life that has been free from setbacks, errors, mistakes, and my first temple marriage ended in divorce. There's nothing about me that says, "Hey, here's a guy who's lived a life of such virtue that there's no question God would want to talk to him." I am not Joel Osteen, I am not Thomas Monson, I am not some great person, but I believed God could forgive me. I believed God wanted to forgive me, and I believed what Joseph said, and the scriptures teach to be true. And, I asked. Then I followed the process laid out in the book, *The Second Comforter: Conversing with the Lord*, and eventually, on the Lord's timing and in the Lord's control, not mine, He did in fact make Himself known to me.

Now that was not the only spiritual encounter I had. Earlier I alluded to the fact that there is always the trickster, there's always the deceiver, there's always the darkness before the light.

You have to press through that because there are forces that want to mislead, deceive, and hijack us, and I'm acquainted with those forces, as well as with the light and the truth. I can tell you I don't believe I am a very good student. You quoted from the blog where I said, "Angels have instructed me." I'm not a very good student. Angels have personalities. Angels are real, sentient beings and I'm confident there are those who have gone back, returned and reported, and said, "I don't know what you see in this guy. He's dumb."

We're about out of time but I'll tell you one incident where I was caught up. I was in the presence of an elderly looking gentleman dressed in a white robe with a white beard who gave me some instruction. I heard what he had to say, and when he finished what he had to say I was a tourist. I stood there and I looked around, and I noticed that the floor we stood on was transparent and the wall was transparent, and I'm standing there thinking, "Why would you go to the trouble of building a wall if you can see right through the wall? That seems kind of self defeating." And then I noticed there was a painting on the wall and I thought, "Are you kidding me? People up here have nothing better to do with their time than to paint paintings?" I thought that would be more of an earthly endeavor. Why would they be doing it up here? I'm paying attention to everything except the fact that I've just gotten a message. I've just gotten instruction, and I've got someone standing there waiting for me to ask a question, and I never asked a question. I'm sure that was unimpressive. I'm sure that angel's impression of me would have been, "This guy's a dud. Why on earth would I be sent to give that message to that man because there's not enough to this guy to worry about."

The divine and the forces that are out there are not limited to inaccessibility to the masses. Every one of us have within us the capacity for the transcendent. Every one of us have within us the ability to reach up to God. I have faith and I have confidence that if we do it and if we follow the manner – and I try and outline it in *The Second Comforter* – that was commended to us, that the success stories are not going to be limited to a Joseph Smith, or a Moses, or a Nephi; it was meant to be the common experience of mankind. That is the story you hear in the temple. That is the purpose of the endowment. You and I are supposed to be prepared in all things to receive, individually, further light and knowledge by conversing with the Lord through the veil. That's what you're invited to do, that's what I'm invited to do, and you're probably a better candidate that was I. If God can reach down to someone like me, all the more someone like you.

John: This is going to be a teaser for the next time I interview you, where we talk about this more in depth.

Denver: [laughing] As if you got a willing participant to be interviewed this time. You had to talk me into this. You think you're getting me back?

John: It's true, I worked hard at it, but that's because a lot of people begged me to interview you. Let me just say this: Give me five steps to being able to have a divine experience. Is it pray, read your scriptures, do your home teaching, go to the temple, pay your tithing?

Denver: No. The best example is the one that I use first in outlining in the book, *The Second Comforter*; it's Nephi. Get Nephi in his context. What he does is, he's now out in the desert. His father has had this extraordinary series of visions. He's got this message and Nephi, like the

rest of the family – and the mother was leading the charge on this – Nephi can't even believe what Lehi is saying. He looks at what's going on and he's a skeptic. Nephi begins by praying and he says – the words he used are majestic. He says he was visited by the Lord. That sounds like a huge deal but it wasn't at that moment. It would become so, but the very first step was when Nephi prayed and *the Lord visited him by softening his heart so that he was able to believe the words of his father*. That's the first step.

John: Softening your heart.

Denver: The first step is reaching the point where you say, “God, I want to believe this.” It's that Lamanite prayer, “O God, if there is a God, and if you are God, make yourself known and I'll follow you.” We are no longer children. We are no longer soft-hearted. We are no longer in the garden talking with God. We have been cast out into the lone and dreary world. We are out here where everything about us is acidic and we have to first say, “You know, I would like to return. I would like to go back. I would like to believe.”

The place it began with Nephi was extraordinarily humble, limited and small. He simply found the ability to begin to believe. Then, when he began to believe it was quite some time, and it required quite a good deal more effort, before he was able to get what was something in answer to prayer more than, “I can believe.” And when he got an answer to prayer he did was he was instructed to do.

Man is so constituted. You're made and I'm made exactly of the same stuff. You have to get an answer from God that has all of the substance of gossamer. It's just an answer that comes into your mind and into your heart. Then you've got to take that and bring it into this concrete world because the answer to prayer is going to lead you to do something. It's when you are lead to do something in this concrete, physical world that you transfer from the state of mere belief into the point of having faith, because you've acted consistent with what you believe God has told you to do. Nephi did that. Great things unfold after you begin to believe, when you believe enough to be able to accept an answer, when you act on that answer, and you – in this physical world – begin to alter what it is you do here, to conform your behavior to what you believe to be God's will, because that will lead you to know it was of God. After that, Nephi went through angelic visitations, and after angelic visitations he met with the Lord.

Nephi took forty years to compose his record. If you read carefully the text it took him that long to think about it. When he put it together, he really put it together with an explanation of the process back to God's presence in mind. The Book of Mormon is a book about coming back into God's presence. Joseph Smith's message is the return to God's presence. The temple ordinances – in fact, all of the ordinances leading up to the conversation at the veil in the temple that Joseph Smith put down here – are an invitation back into God's presence. If you've got that much affirming that you can be back in God's presence, then trust it, act consistent with it, experiment upon it, and let it grow within you. That's all that Nephi did, that's all that I did, and I don't think my results are as important as the recognition that that is possible for you, that it is possible for anyone. That's really the story, connecting you back to the transcendent.

Every one of us have something within us that is, in fact, connected to God, that is, in fact, holy. I don't care if you're an atheist, in your core there is something divine that longs for reunification with the divine, and more so, the divine longs to reunify with it, but we have the freedom to choose and we have the freedom to exclude, and for the most part we elect to bathe in this acidic environment and say, "I've been cast out of the garden. That was back in my childhood. I can't get back there. There's angels and a flaming sword guarding the way." And though there may be, they'll welcome you back if you'll follow the path.

John: Wow. All right, Denver Snuffer, I've thoroughly enjoyed our conversation today. I will again refer our listeners to DenverSnuffer.blogspot.com. Books include *The Second Comforter: Conversing with the Lord through the Veil* and *Passing the Heavenly Gift* among many others. Please join us at MormonStories.org for further commentary and conversation. Denver, I hope you'll come up there and read the comments and respond as you have time.

Denver: Oh sure, yes. But I don't like doing these things so don't suggest part two to me [laughs].

John: Okay, we'll only do it if you feel like that same divine source that you encourage us to tap into, if that divine source happens to suggest that you come on for a second episode on Mormon Stories. Will you do it then?

Denver: Fair enough. Good talking to you.

John: All right, my good brother. Thanks for your time, and I appreciate you coming on Mormon Stories.

Denver: We'll see you, goodbye.

[end of MormonStories-321-DenverSnufferPt2]

(Transcript: Kiyoko Ball, v1.0)