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## **“Until the Heart Betrays”: Life, Letters, and the Stories We Tell**

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# “UNTIL THE HEART BETRAYS”: LIFE, LETTERS, AND THE STORIES WE TELL

*Neal Rappleye*

Review of Adam S. Miller. *Letters to a Young Mormon*. Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2014. 78 pp. \$9.95.

On their 1993 album *Edge of Thorns*, hard rock group Savatage included a piano ballad about a person and a letter:

*Someone got themselves a letter,  
in the mail the other day  
It's already worn and tattered,  
and I guess it gives away  
All the things we keep inside,  
all the things that really matter  
The face puts on its best disguise,  
and all is well ... until the heart betrays<sup>1</sup>*

Adam S. Miller's new book is composed of a series of "letters" which, like the one in the song, contain both "the things we [tend to] keep inside," and "the things that really matter." Like the song, Miller talks about the disguises we wear—though he calls them our "stories," which is his way of labeling self-justifications or self-deceptions for our deeds and hence way of living. And he talks about how our hearts should "betray" our

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1 Savatage, "All That I Bleed," *Edge of Thorns* (New York: Atlantic Records, 1993), track 10—ellipses included to represent the dramatic pause in the song, not the omission of material.

rationalizing stories and turn to God, who sees us and loves us for what we can be or who we potentially are all along.

“Like everyone,” he writes to his young friend, “you have a story you want your life to tell” (p. 17). This “story” becomes a self-imposed standard we feel we must live up to, and as such it haunts us. “This narration follows you around like a shadow. It mimes you, measures you, sometimes mocks you, and pretends, in its flat, black simplicity, to be the truth about you” (p. 18). We tend to think, or at least we try to convince ourselves, that this is the same story everyone else sees us living. As such, we often live in fear of what happens when we fail to live up to this “story” we have fashioned. Miller talks about how we may even give God “a starring role” as the one who can make our story come true, “with some cajoling and obedience” on our part (p. 19).

Of course, life isn’t a story, and so we naturally fail to measure up. When this happens, unhealthy guilt and shame try to force us into making life fit the story anyway; we rationalize, justify, and engage in self-deception. Miller tells us that with God it is different: “As the heavens are higher than the earth, God’s work in your life is bigger than the story you’d like that life to tell” (p. 17). Miller lectures his young and troubled Mormon in the following way:

Jesus is not asking you to tell a better story or live your story more successfully, he’s asking you to lose that story. “Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it” (Matthew 10:39 NRSV). Hell is when your story succeeds, not when it fails. Your suffocating story is the problem, not the solution. Surrender it and find your life. Your story is heavy and hard to bear. “Come to me,” Jesus says, “all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon

you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28–30 NRSV). Put down the millstone of your story and take up the yoke of life instead. . . . Let his life manifest itself in yours rather than trying to impose your story on the life he gives. (p. 21.)

But how do we abandon our deceptive, rationalizing stories, including our visions of grandeur or our narratives of self-deprecation, and let God into our lives? This is a question that Miller never explicitly asks, but it seems to me it is one constantly being probed throughout the book, which consists of chapters on faith (pp. 25-29), scripture (pp. 31-35), prayer (pp. 37-41), history (pp. 43-49), science (pp. 51-56) and so on—all of which explore in some way or other how to stay true to the life and work God has for us rather than fabricate and then capitulate to the stories we try to impose upon ourselves.

One story that can be told—we can tell it to ourselves, or others may try to convince us of it—pits science and religion against each other. But Miller urges young Latter-day Saints to embrace what is found in the sciences as “revelations.” He suggests that they “are among the most commanding God has ever given” (pp. 55-56).<sup>2</sup>

Miller holds that another false story we tell ourselves might be that the Mormon past is filled with heroes of epic proportion, veritable giants among men, “quasi-angels” (p. 46) who did no wrong and always accomplished great things with an eye single

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2 Certainly Latter-day Saints struggle with the current findings of several sciences. The Interpreter Foundation’s recent symposium on *Science and Mormonism: Cosmos, Earth, and Man*, held on November 9, 2013 in Provo, Utah, provided answers to those who feel a need to see a harmony between faith and scientific endeavors. The proceedings of this conference are being prepared for publication. The videos are available online at <http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/events/2013-symposium-science-mormonism-cosmos-earth-man/conference-videos/> (accessed January 3, 2014).

to the glory of God. As with the story we might tell about our own lives, this is a story that eventually fails, and when it does it can generate a crisis. But also like the stories we tell about our lives, God's work is bigger than these stories. Miller argues that

It's a false dilemma to claim that either God works through practically flawless people or God doesn't work at all. The gospel isn't a celebration of God's power to work with flawless people. The gospel is a celebration of God's willingness to work today, in our world, in our lives, with people who clearly aren't [flawless?]. To demand that church leaders, past and present, show us only a mask of angelic pseudo-perfection is to deny the gospel's most basic claim: that God's grace works through our weakness. We need prophets, not idols. (p. 47, brackets mine.)

Miller argues that if we are going to reject the stories we and others tell about ourselves and about the world, we are going to need to know something of the stories God has told us about ourselves and his relationship to us. Here Miller believes our scriptures come in. How can this happen? Careful study of our scriptures makes it possible for us to "put down our stories and take up theirs" (p. 32). Miller urges his young correspondent to "Get close to the scriptures.... God is in there" (p. 31). Our scriptures tell us about such things as the restoration and the revelation of new scripture. As Miller explains it, Joseph Smith "always expected more revelations, and 'translation' was one vital name for the hard work of receiving them" (p. 32). But "translation" for Miller is not merely the task of the prophet or scholar, nor is it merely the transferring of the text from one language to another. Translation for Miller is "a way, day by day, of holding life open for God's word" (p. 32), which is his way of adopting and modifying the metaphor used by Joseph Smith to identify the process of reading and interpreting what

we have read in ways most applicable to our lives, and as such it is pictured as a crucial task for everyone. Miller can be read as saying that we must make our own stories match the stories found in our scriptures. He argues that

Joseph produced, as God required, the first public translations of the scriptures we now share. But that work, open-ended all along, is unfinished. Now the task is ours. When you read the scriptures, don't just lay your eyes like stones on the pages. Roll up your sleeves and translate them again.... Word by word, line by line, verse by verse, chapter by chapter, God wants the whole thing translated once more, and this time he wants it translated into your native tongue, inflected by your native concerns, and written in your native flesh. (pp. 32–33.)

Miller's "translation" is something like Nephi's "likening" (see 1 Nephi 19:23; 2 Nephi 6:5; 11:8). In this sense it involves, among other things, prayer, study, meditation, and also consultation of the "best books." These are all part of what is necessary to successfully re-translate the scriptures by making them the ground for our own stories. It is something that will require faith. "You'll have to trust that the books can withstand your scrutiny and you'll have to trust that God, despite their antiquity, can be contemporary in them" (p. 34). What Miller means by "faith" is to "practice faithfully attending to the difficult, disturbing, and resistant truths God sets knocking at your door" (p. 27) and to trust "that the life God offers you doesn't need your stories to dress it up," hence "trust God enough to let your stories die" (p. 25).

Miller explains that like all translation, this will not be an easy task. It will take work, and drawing on D&C 88:118, he stresses the importance of using the "best books" to help us in our efforts to believe, understand, and thereby be able to

“translate” the scriptures anew so that we have the life offered by God. He tells his young Mormon that

Your ability to translate with power will depend on your faith and it will be amplified by your familiarity with the world’s best books... . The more familiar you are with Israelite histories, Near Eastern [and also, I believe, Mesoamerican] archaeologies, and secular biblical scholarship, the richer your translations will be rendered. Don’t be afraid of scripture, and don’t be afraid of these other books.... Doubtless, the world’s best books have their flaws, but this just means that they too must be translated. You’ll need to translate *them* so that they can contribute to your own translations. (p. 34, brackets mine)

But in this process, there are inherent dangers: how can we be sure that when we “translate” the scriptures; we don’t read our false, rationalizing story into them? How can we be sure we are not fooling ourselves, or soothing our consciences by making the scriptures say what we want them to say? Miller answers:

You’ll know you’ve done it right if, as a result of the work, you repent. “Say nothing but repentance unto this generation,” the Lord told Oliver Cowdery when he came to help Joseph translate the Book of Mormon (D&C 6:9). This is your charge too: translate nothing but repentance. When you’re reading them right, the scriptures will bring you up short. They’ll call you into question. They’ll challenge your stories and deflate your pretensions. They’ll show you how you’ve been wrong, and they’ll show you how to make things right (pp. 33–34).



The proper scripture study will not reinforce the old self-deceptive stories you have been telling. Instead, it will assist you to “lay down your stories and, minute by minute, day by day, give your life back to him,” i.e., God (pp. 17–18).

Miller’s book is not perfect. The chapter on “hunger,” for example (pp. 57–60), is confusing. He works with clever metaphors, but sometimes they are unclear. He carries his “hunger” metaphor over into the chapter on sex (pp. 61–66), creating some ambiguity where most parents of “young Mormons” would insist that blunt clarity is preferable. For parents who have open and frank discussions with their adolescent children, such ambiguity is easily remedied, but books like Miller’s cannot do the talking for them. Nonetheless, concerned parents may want to find a different book to help them deal with this particular issue.

Another point where the ambiguity is a concern is the chapter on eternal life (pp. 73–78). Whereas I liked the idea that eternal life is “a certain *way* of being alive” (p. 75), it is never clear in the chapter if Miller genuinely believes in a life after death. While this may not be a concern for most readers, for any “young Mormon” struggling to believe, the lack of explicit reaffirmation in a hereafter could be disconcerting.

A recent press release from the Maxwell Institute indicates that a new *Living Faith* series, of which this is the initial book, “will commend and defend the faith more explicitly than our other [current Maxwell Institute] publications, while still maintaining the highest academic standards.”<sup>3</sup> Defending the faith is an admirable aim, part of our temple covenants, and something our leaders have admonished us to do. We sometimes call doing this “apologetics,” and Miller’s little book can be read as his effort to do such.

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3 “Announcing the ‘Living Faith’ book series,” *Maxwell Institute Blog*, January 3, 2014, <http://maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/living-faith-books/> (accessed January 3, 2014), brackets mine.

At the beginning of the first “letter,” he makes a straightforward declaration: “I don’t know” (p. 9). Presumably, young S., as Miller refers to his hypothetical correspondent, has asked him some tough questions. Miller then makes an important point: “But it’s also true that even if I knew what to say and how to say it, you’d still have to work out the answers yourself” (p. 9). In defending the faith, we often provide answers to questions that are frankly quite peripheral and tangential to the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is not to suggest that scholars should cease seeking to provide answers to all the tough questions people are bound to ask—such endeavors are both necessary and important. In so doing, however, we are generally treating symptoms, not the problem itself. But what more can we do? A Latter-day Saint must come to his or her own faith. Miller indicates that the working out of answers is ultimately a personal journey, and only the individual (along with God) can do it. The well-worked-out answers of others can be valuable aids in that process, which justifies Miller’s effort to provide a little guidance to the “working out” process. Others, such as Mike Ash,<sup>4</sup> have provided some guidance for this often difficult process of sorting out issues that arise, and Miller’s book makes an excellent addition to such tools and resources.

Overall, Miller’s book is quite good; it is an easy, subtle, and enjoyable read, which is ideal for a book targeting youth. Miller is also very articulate; some passages are quite quotable. For those interested, it could provide good fodder for sacrament meeting talks, devotional addresses, Family Home Evening lessons, and so on.

The letters in this book do not, of course, contain “*all* the things that really matter,” but those who want a little extra

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4 Michael R. Ash, *Shaken Faith Syndrome: Strengthening One’s Testimony in the Face of Criticism and Doubt*, 2nd edition (Redding, CA: FAIRMormon, 2013). Part 1 offers useful guidance for navigating a faith crisis, while Part 2 then provides some answers to difficult issues.

guidance (which can be all of us, at times) may find their copy “already worn and tattered” as they frequently read and reflect on Miller’s words while they endeavor to figure out, with God’s help, “what it means to live in a way that refuses to abandon either life or Mormonism” (unnumbered page in front matter, would be p. 7, emphasis added).

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