

Martha Beck's "Leaving the Saints" - A Review

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We all grow up with the weight of history on us. Our ancestors dwell in the attics of our brains as they do in the spiralling chains of knowledge hidden in every cell of our bodies. Shirley Abbott

Introduction

Let me first state my biases. I am a former Mormon Bishop. Several years ago I decided that I no longer wished to live with the mental and social pretzels Mormon life created for me. I hence resigned my Mormon membership, and am thrilled with the life I now live. I practice Canadian tax law for a living. The long version of my story and some of my thoughts regarding Mormonism in general can be found at <http://home.mccue.cc:10000/bob/spirituality.htm>.

I continue to have the highest regard for most of my Mormon family and friends. They are in general honest, kind, well-intentioned people most of whom have great difficulty confronting facts that may disconfirm their religious beliefs. There is nothing unusual about this. It is part of the basic nature of most conservative religious groups. And, this aspect of Mormon life explains, in my view, the Mormon vitriol found in some of the reviews of Martha Beck's book "Leaving the Saints" and the feedback Beck has personally received, as indicated at <http://www.leavingthesaints.com/mail.html>. That is, Beck's father, Hugh Nibley, is so important to Mormonism that faithful Mormons have about as much a chance of objectively assessing the damning things Beck has to say about him as they do of objectively assessing the merits of The Book of Mormon or that Joseph Smith was quite possibly a charismatic, carpet bagging, treasure seeking, ladies' man who found that his road to success was smoothest if he travelled as a religious leader.

When I heard about Beck's book my ears perked up because Nibley was one of my idols while I was Mormon. For many years, my attitude (which is a common Mormon attitude) was that Hugh Nibley was so smart that if something was good enough for him, it had to be good enough for me. Almost three years ago I came to the realization that many smart people defend ideological positions that are patently ridiculous from a rational "outsider's" point of view. Michael Shermer in "Why People Believe Weird Things" reviews this phenomenon in some detail. It appears, in fact, that the smarter a person is the more likely they are to have a hard time letting go of the first ideas of which they become convinced. Psychologists call this the "confirmation bias". It affects all of us, and apparently the smarter we are the more subject to it we are likely to be. This is likely what led the great philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn to conclude that, "science progresses one funeral at a time". Even those most objective and intelligent among us – our scientists – are held captive by their opinions to a much greater extent than most of us (and certainly most of them) are comfortable acknowledging. So, long ago while crossing my Mormon Rubicon I dismiss Hugh Nibley's opinions regarding Mormonism, spirituality etc. as I have also dismissed the views of the many intelligent, well-educated people who defend ideological positions in favour of young earth creationism, anti-Darwinism, the denial of the Holocaust, etc. Nonetheless, I was interested to hear what the "inside scoop" was regarding Hugh Nibley and his family. I knew of Beck as a result of the articles she writes for Oprah's magazine, which my wife regularly reads. I found the few of her pieces I read there to be thoughtful, well written and

interesting and so long before I had heard of her incest allegations, but had heard that she was writing, "Leaving the Saints", I decided that I would carefully read it.

The issue that overshadows all else in "Leaving the Saints" is Beck's allegation that Nibley sexually abused her as a child. This allegation is tragic from many perspectives, as well as so bizarre that some will dismiss it on that basis alone. I will return to that below, and will show that intellectual parameter of Hugh Nibley's world at the time the alleged abuse occurred were surreal as well. But first I will deal quickly with some of the many other issues Beck treats. They are of sufficient interest to justify reading the book on their own, and provide an unfortunate basis on which those who wish to discredit Beck may do so.

As noted below, it is my view there is not enough data available to judge between Beck and Nibley on the incest allegation. The Nibley family has officially responded to Beck by way of a website (see <http://www.hughnibleydefense.com/>) which solicits funds for defence purposes. They have said that they are considering legal action. I will speculate below as to the route such a lawsuit may take. And, I will mention some of the evidence the Nibley's have released to the public to counter Beck's claims. It is not my purpose here to attempt to weigh the evidence. There is not enough available to make that a worthwhile exercise. My purpose, rather, is to outline the case Beck has put to the public, indicate that in my view it is strong enough to be taken seriously but should not be accepted at this point, and to place this controversy in the broader Mormon context. In my view, the Beck – Nibley dispute is a microcosm of many things Mormon.

Fact or Fiction – Beck's Use of Hyperbole

I have had a final draft of this book since the end of January. Beck sent it to me with the expectation that I would review it. The main thrust of my views as here expressed were formed within a week of receiving the book, and were then communicated to Beck with a suggestion that she edit the book before publication to make it less hyperbolic. A polite reply came back to me from her partner Karen Gerdes thanking me for my suggestion, and indicating that the book had shortly beforehand gone to press.

Beck describes her life in Boston before returning to live in Utah in the early 1990s in less than flattering terms. If we are to believe her, Boston is as cold and uncaring as Provo initially seemed to her like Heaven when she returned to live there after a number of years away studying at Harvard. I do not buy either picture. I have lived in Orem (cheek to jowl with Provo) and still have many friends and relatives who live in that area. I have relatives and friends who live in New England. I found Beck's characterization of her experience in both places exaggerated.

Beck also describes her time teaching at BYU. She happened to be there during a period of notorious academic purges, and has some interesting insights into what happened in that regard. Because of what seemed to me to be a tendency to exaggerate regarding the general ebb and flow of life in Boston and Provo, I will assume that she is exaggerating regarding the behaviour of the people at BYU with whom she associated. However, I have read enough other material about this period of time at BYU that I believe most of her story on this point. The core idea of suppression of academic expression in the early 1990s has been clearly documented at BYU. I know several professors who left BYU as a result of the kind of thing Beck describes. It is regrettable, from my point of view, that Beck reduced her credibility on this point by not being realistic with respect to mundane matters.

In the context of Beck's description of BYU, she narrates the experience she and her husband John had as they gradually acknowledged that they no longer believed the Mormon story. This part of her book rang mostly true to me. Again, there is likely hyperbole around the edges, but the core of what Beck has to say in this regard is consistent with my own experience and that of many other people I know. She noted the manner in which some loved ones who are faithful Mormons fought through a great deal of pain to stay emotionally in touch with her and John. She told some stories that showed how deeply those within the "faithful" Mormon community fear those who openly express disbelief. And she described some things that were bizarre, but regrettably believable, like the impromptu invitation one of her daughters received to attend a "baptism party" at which she and a number of kids her age would all be baptized as Mormons. Beck tells us that this invitation was extended while she stood by, well after her disbelief of Mormonism was public knowledge.

I note that John Beck published a short review of the book at http://www.amazon.com/gp/cdp/member-reviews/A3IK12FIB5XI6Q/ref=cm_aya_rev_more/103-0918221-4179821?%5Fencoding=UTF8 It is fair to say that he agrees that Martha perceives their experience more radically than did he. This is consistent with what seems to be to be a hyperbolic approach to life. John says, for example:

One of the most hurtful discrepancies in the book is the way she describes my parents. She reports that my mother and father came to our house the day after my appearance on television (not true, it was a couple of days later) and in the midst of much small talk Martha inferred that my parents were telling me that they still loved me. Here's how it really went. My mother walked in the door gave me a hug before she even had her coat off and with tears in her eyes said "I don't agree with your decision, but you are my son and I want you to know that I will always love you." It was one of the most touching and important moments in my life. I will always love and respect my mother for her forthrightness and willingness to so openly forgive me even though I had done something so hurtful to her.

From my point of view, this is a minor discrepancy. I understand why John would feel that the distinction between what how Martha and he perceived these events was important, but we are talking about a pedestrian difference between how different people perceive the same events.

John continues as follows:

My experience of the Mormon response to my leaving the church is also rather different from the one I read in this book. While I left the church even before Martha (and arguably more publicly), I personally never received one threatening phone call or note. I never even saw any of Martha's. While I remember Martha talking about one crank phone call, she received; I do not remember that the caller threatened to "dis-member" us. Nor did Martha show or talk to me about the copy of a "blood red" Antichrist note she writes about receiving. I never took any precautions against such "threats" because I never heard about them. Perhaps she did receive them, but said nothing to me about them.

From my point of view, John took the high road in this review. He did not impute motives or thoughts to Martha. He simply noted what he was aware of, and what he was not, and left the reader to decide whether Martha is perhaps imagining things that did not happen, or grossly exaggerating. In any event, John Beck stopped far short of the kind of factual disagreement others have attributed to him. Now that he has on the public record and has chosen to be quite

circumspect as to what he is prepared to say, I put less weight on the ideas that have been attributed to him.

Martha describes a number of experiences that she characterized as helping her to discover a meaningful form of spirituality that now sustains her outside of Mormonism. This part of the story includes several larger-than-life experiences. This is a woman who seems to live on a roller coaster. While I thought there was a lot of hyperbole in this account, I could feel through it much of my own more muted journey. I had 10% of the drama she did (which felt like a lot to me) while walking a similar path. This part of the book also captured the pathos of the experience many have as they watch a belief system that seemed certain turn to dust. I was moved by many of the things she had to say, and by the manner in which she said them.

I also note the value, in some cases, of caricature. Beck blows the essential elements of the spiritual journey many of us have taken up to the point at which they are near impossible to miss. This may be helpful in a therapeutic way, and I suspect that many people who have left a conservative faith (or are struggling to do so) will be gripped by this part of her story. And, this feature of Beck's writing is why many faithful Mormons who read her book have dismissed it as pure fiction, and vehemently so. The emotional force they expend on this likely relates to the need they feel to justify completely ignoring Beck's allegation of sexual abuse regarding her father.

It is ironic to note the difference between the average faithful Mormon's insistence on a rigorous and complete statement of "the facts" in Beck's case, and their near refusal to consider the well-documented facts related to the foundations of Mormonism, Joseph Smith's history of deception, etc. and the manner in which the Mormon Church systematically suppresses and distorts those facts.

The high water mark to this point of the detailed critiques that have issued from the Mormon camp regarding Beck's book is Boyd Jay Peterson's 25 page review that can be found at <http://www.sunstoneonline.com/Download/B-Petersen-Response.pdf>. Peterson is Nibley's biographer and son-in-law. He is married to Zina, Beck's younger sister. Peterson (as well as other reviewers) has many critical things to say about Beck's credibility with regard to the non-incest part of the book. Many of his points call for response from the Beck camp, but are far from devastating to the core of Beck's message. A detailed review of how Peterson's story does not square with Beck's is too large a job to tackle here, and is premature in any event. However, a few of the points he makes are worth noting at this point:

- Allegedly John Beck, who is mentioned warmly throughout the book, Martha's earlier memoir "Expecting Adam" was written as a novel and rejected by publishers many times. Martha reworked it as a memoir to get it published but according to John did not change it much, and so accordingly to Peterson, John wonders about "Leaving the Saints". Since we now have John's review of the book, as noted above, and he chooses not to mention anything along these lines, we have to wonder how much weight to put on Peterson's summary of what John allegedly thought. However, it seems that this concern (whether expressed by John or not) is likely justified by things like the alleged (and if true, silly) error "Leaving the Saints" contains relative to a reference to one of Martha's therapists to whom she refers pseudonymously as "Raquel Grant". At one point in the book, this pseudonym triggers a supposedly real question in Martha's mind as to a possible connection between her therapist (whose real surname is supplied by Peterson and others, and is not "Grant") and former LDS prophet Heber J. Grant. Fact and fiction seem to here be keeping much closer company than should be expected in a

memoir that purports to stick carefully to the facts. One, regrettably, recalls disgraced former Mormon General Authority Paul Dunn's faith promoting and fictional stories that for decades were passed off as truth, or indeed Mormon history in general as the Mormon Church tells it.

- Someone allegedly told Martha that he was a footnote checker for Hugh's publisher, and that 90% of Nibley's footnotes do not support the point they are cited for. Many people have been critical of Nibley's writing in this regard. But 90%? More hyperbole, in my view.
- Martha said that she tried to find sources related to Sonia Johnston (a prominent Mormon feminist who was in the news at the relevant time) in the BYU library and discovered that all of them had been removed. Peterson recently checked and could not find any evidence of tampering in this regard. While Martha may not have checked carefully enough, it is easy for me to imagine books being removed from the stacks at BYU during the early 1990s.
- As noted above, Martha says that some ward members showed up at her door and tried to entice her eight-year-old daughter to attend a "baptism party" at which she and other kids her age would be baptized. Peterson says that this would not happen because, among other things, one needs approval from a Mormon Bishopric member (a leader of a local Mormon congregation) before baptism. A woman who lived most of her life in the Provo area told me that this kind of thing did happen in her Ward. Without going into the detail of Mormon congregational administration, I can say that this kind of thing is easily imaginable for me.

That being said, Peterson's list of complaints regarding hyperbole is long, and mostly justified in my view.

I would also say that the book is funny in parts; often touching; full of fascinating details about how a family of dysfunctional geniuses gets along (or does not get along); what it feels like to fall into and crawl out of the deepest despair; what it feels like to have a secure world turn to dust before your eyes; etc.

The sections concerning how Beck and Nibley communicated are worth the read all by themselves. They both have near photographic memories, it seems. Beck describes this ability as a "trick frontal lobe" that she inherited from her father, and indicates that on the rare occasions when they did speak, they would quote Shakespeare and other literary greats to obliquely tell each other what they wished to say. To play this game, one must have read widely and remembered much more than all but a few of us can while doing so.

As fiction, "Leaving the Saints" would be a worthwhile read. As a hyperbolic fact, it is more than worthwhile as long as it is taken with an appropriate grain of salt. And with regret, I express my view that Beck missed the chance to do something much more useful than she did because of how she exaggerated the unimportant and so made it hard for us to accept at face value some of the critically important things she had to say about the twisting nature of the emotional space inhabited by those who take literally the demands and claims of Mormonism. That, in my view, is what this book should have been about – the painful but tremendously rewarding process of removing the psychological hooks of a literalist belief system, and how that system warped an entire family including particularly Hugh Nibley and Martha Beck.

I should note regarding Beck's tendency to exaggerate that a few days ago I received an email from a friend who has a lot of clinical counselling experience. He told me that survivors of childhood sexual abuse often have dramatic tendencies like Beck's. Certain clinical personality disorders also look something Beck's behaviour and can be triggered by either childhood sexual abuse or emotional abandonment. And Beck need not have a clinical version of these disorders for them to be relevant to her behaviour. Dr. John Ratey in "Shadow Syndromes" shows how the sub-clinical versions of the major psychiatric syndromes often define dominant personality traits.

I also find it interesting that much of Beck's writing (see her column in the "O Magazine" for example) does not display hyperbole. But, when she turns to her most intimate personal memoirs (as in "Leaving the Saints") I accept that her perspective is overly dramatic, and so I am even more sceptical with regard to the facts she alleges than is generally the case when I read personal accounts.

So, I don't recommend that anyone swallow Beck's story whole. That is not, however, a justification to dismiss her story. It is reason to pay close attention as the evidence comes in that may either support or not what she has to say.

Allegations of Sexual Abuse

That being said, let's move to the powder keg to which Beck sets a match – the allegation that Hugh Nibley sexually abused her.

I am on the fence regarding the accuracy of Martha Beck's allegations of sexual abuse. There is not, in my view, enough information on the table yet for anyone to responsibly draw a conclusion. However, from that I have read of the commentary regarding this issue, I think it is fair to say that there is a lot of misinformation in circulation.

Let me outline Beck's theory of what happened as it can be pieced together from her book and other sources.

- Nibley was a war veteran who suffered some horrendous experiences in that context and displayed classic post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms including a habit of waking at 5 am, wandering around and not recalling his actions. This behaviour occurred during the period of alleged abuse.
- (2) The Book of Abraham (BofA) provides what faithful Mormons believe to be a true history of Abraham among the ancient Egyptians. Mormons believe that Joseph Smith, the Mormon prophet, translated the BofA from certain Egyptian papyri (the "JS papyri") that fell into his possession. These were believed to have been destroyed by a fire in Chicago, but showed up at the Metropolitan Museum in New York in the early 1900s. By no later than the early 1960s (and probably much earlier than that) Nibley, and presumably Mormon leaders, knew the Met had these documents. The Mormon Church feigned surprise at their orchestrated "discovery" in 1966.
- The BofA was determined by linguistic experts not to be a translation in any ordinary sense of that term of the JS papyri. Rather, the JS papyri are part of a standard Egyptian funeral text. This was at odds with the prevailing LDS belief during the 1960s. Amazingly, most Mormons still believe that the BofA is a literal translation of the JS papyri.

- The Mormon Church assigned Nibley to become an expert in Egyptian translation so that he could defend the Mormon interest as other experts provided the first “real” translations of the text Mormons believed to be the Book of Abraham.
- Nibley knew that the BofA was not a translation in the ordinary sense of that word of the JS papyri, and had to find alternative explanations for it.
- Nibley came to believe that God inspired Smith to write the BofA and that it records real events in the life of a real person, Abraham. Nibley came up with a variety of bizarre arguments to justify the BofA that were based on the text of the JS papyri (including some kind of a hidden code God had caused to be written into its hieroglyphs that only Smith could see), but he eventually retreated to a position that Smith was “inspired” by the Egyptian funerary text and as a result received by revelation a story of Abraham in Egypt that loosely paralleled the hieroglyphs in some ways. Nibley, to my knowledge, has never taken the position that the story of Abraham in the BofA is a metaphor. As far as Nibley was concerned, it is real history.
- Nibley believed that God used well-understood aspects of Egyptian mythology as presented in the JS papyri, including the incestuous god of fertility Min, to inspire Smith about Abraham’s life. Importantly, Min was somehow linked symbolically to Abraham since God used Min to represent Abraham in the JS papyri. For more detail as to the sexual content of the JS papyri, see http://nowscape.com/mormon/papyrus/by_his_own_hand.htm under the heading “Religious Pornography”. This includes excerpts from Nibley’s book “Abraham in Egypt”, which show that Nibley was intimately acquainted the erotic detail of the JS papyri.
- Nibley was unstable as a result of stressful experiences as a war veteran.
- Nibley was further destabilized as a result of the stress caused by his defence of the Mormon faith during the BofA debacle. He was the damage control guy. He had to spin the evidence with regard to the tenuous at best connection between the JS papyri and the BofA so as to minimize the damage to the faithful Mormon position caused by what the Egyptologists were saying (and have been saying ever since) about Smith as a translator of Egyptian. This was a difficult job in light of the general Mormon belief that the BofA was a literal translation of the JS papyri and the Mormon expectation that Smith’s abilities as a translator would finally be vindicated when the JS papyri were found.
- Nibley was psychologically predisposed to sexual dysfunction as a result of having been sexually abused by his own mother, another bizarre Min-like connection. The Egyptian mythology related to Min included the idea that he committed incest with his mother and other family members.
- Nibley devoted much of his life to the study of Abraham and the idea of the Abrahamic sacrifice (the alleged commandment from God that Abraham kill his only son). There are extensive mythic and other parallels between death and sex. The incestuous acts of Min could be characterized as a form of sacrifice, and had important ritual connections. There is a long history in many religious traditions (including Near Eastern religions such as Judaism) of ritual sexual activity.

- Nibley stopped having sex with his wife after his youngest child Zina was born, over a year before the alleged abuse began.
- Nibley had displayed dissociative behaviour on many occasions, and particularly during the early morning hours when much of the abuse is alleged to have occurred.
- Nibley was in an extreme literalist phase of his personal religious beliefs, as indicated by Appendix D – Letter to Sterling M. McMurrin, 23 August 1967 (p. 427, 428) in Nibley's authorized biography ("Hugh Nibley - A Consecrated Life – (The Authorized Biography of Hugh Nibley), by Boyd Jay Petersen). Here is an excerpt from that letter: "My present religious mood is an all, out literalism. If the history of Christianity has been one long undignified retreat, one continual process of accommodation to the science of the hour (Whitehead), the time has come to reverse the process, since the science of the hour has brought us to a most dismal slough in which it is no delight to dwell (Kozyrez). ... So today, just for kicks, I read the Scriptures AS IF everything in them was meant to be taken in the most literal sense, as if no such thing as a symbol, allegory, or type even existed. **And in doing that I find that there begins to build up within my personal computer a mass of data that has a totally different power and thrust from anything I have know before.** Granted that the new deposit in its naïve literalism will in time need radical correction, still I'm convinced that the correction will not have to be nearly so radical as that required by the opposite view – that of the doctors of the church, who insisted in reading the scriptures as if nothing in them was to be taken literally, and instructed their students never to give a literal interpretation to a passage if any other interpretation was possible." (Emphasis mine)
- Nibley went into a dissociative state during which he was influenced both by the bizarre material related to Egyptian mythology in which he was immersed, and the other forces noted above, and as a result sexually abused Beck in a fashion that evoked Egyptian themes. No conscious act on Nibley's part was required. The alleged abuse occurred when Beck was between five and eight years old.
- Beck recovered the memory of the alleged sexual abuse after acting as an academic observer of a counselling session during which some people began to speak about their own sexual abuse. She then pieced together many bits of circumstantial evidence from her life up to that point that made sense in light of the memory she had recovered.

Here are a few of Peterson's main points related to the incest allegation that I think Beck will need to deal with if she wishes to maintain the credibility of her position.

- Peterson suggests that information related to both of John and Martha's change in sexual orientation should have been included in the book to indicate that Martha's perception of Mormonism as emotionally and intellectually inhospitable should not be trusted. While I would have preferred that Martha tell that part of the story as well, the conclusion Peterson suggests is not warranted. Martha has indicated that she wanted to tell that part of the story, and her editors would not let her. The felt it distracted from her main point.
- Peterson makes a similar error, in my view, when he tells of Martha having a presumably lesbian relationship going on while she was leaving Mormonism. This type of thing is one of countless reasons for which a person may have the fact that Mormonism is not what he or she thought it was drawn to his or her attention. As long as we are comfortable, we

tend to remain unconscious. As we become aware that something does not fit, we tend to gradually become more aware. Martha's wake up call perhaps involved her sexual orientation. Mine did not involve any such thing. There are many wakeup calls. Peterson seems to proceed from the premise that there can be no wake up call of this sort that is valid. This makes it impossible for him to assess the facts in front of him. He already has his answer. The only question is how the information with which he is presented confirms his answer. He is a classic apologist in this respect despite trying hard to appear balanced as he weighs the evidence. Give his emotional investment in this matter, that is hardly surprising.

- I thought that Peterson's summary of Martha's experimentation with self-hypnosis was interesting. He states:

In conversations Martha had with her sisters at the time, Martha told them she had read many self-help books, performed "self-hypnosis" to "discover" the hidden memories of incest, and then sought out a "therapist" who "specialized" in recovered memories of sexual abuse. She also tried to persuade her sisters and husband to use the same techniques to discover hidden trauma. "Martha was always hypnotizing herself and trying to hypnotize me," states John. "She tried getting me to go under on multiple occasions. I guess I was a tough subject."

On her website, however, Martha states:

When I began having new memories of traumatic events in my childhood, I was not in therapy of any kind, nor was I employing any sort of "memory recovery technique" such as hypnosis. I was, however, back in the hometown of my childhood, and my oldest daughter had reached the age I was when the trauma originally took place. As is true of other trauma survivors in well-documented cases (such as military cases of repressed and recovered memories verified by many observers), I experienced these memories as extremely vivid, intrusive flashbacks that occurred when something triggered an association with my childhood.

Both versions of events can be reconciled if Martha began to experiment with self hypnosis after recovering the memory in the manner just indicated, which is consistent with her much more elaborate (and compelling from the point of view of someone who has been abused, or so I am told) description of the relevant events in the book. Martha's account of the sexual abuse aspect of this matter is worth reading in full, at <http://www.leavingthesaints.com/settingrecord.htm>.

- One of the most interesting pieces of evidence Peterson puts forward (again with John Beck's assistance) relates to Martha's indication that she was sexually abused by a neighbour boy. This provides an alternative explanation for the vaginal scarring she reports. If she was so abused, this does not foreclose abuse by her father. In fact, sexual abuse by a parent dramatically increases the likelihood of a girl ending up in situations later in life in which further abuse is likely. In any event, Martha's response on this point is as follows:

There was a teenage boy who set a trap for me when I was 9 years old. He took me into his bedroom, shoved a chest of drawers in front of the door, and started rubbing against me. My editor cut out that chapter because she thought it was

irrelevant to the story. Now she's kicking herself for having removed it. And my family claims that my father rescued me from this situation. In fact, the kid's little brothers went and told my father what was happening. He came over and dragged me home by the scruff of the neck, and he was screaming, "The Lord is going to hit you with a ton of bricks." If this was a rescue, why didn't my father call the police? Why didn't he call the boy's parents? The fact that my family accepts this incident as a normal occurrence of childhood says a lot. (see <http://www.phoenixnewtimes.com/issues/2005-04-21/culture/speakeasy.html>)

- Peterson also suggests (once again quoting John Beck) that doctors at various times did not find any vaginal scarring. One would have to consult with the doctors in question about that. That fact that John does not mention anything of this type in his review of the book (referenced above) casts doubt on Peterson's use of the same information.
- And finally Peterson suggests that Martha had confided in John that she felt that the memories that she recovered regarding her father were not valid, whereas those she had regarding the neighbour boy were. Now that we have heard from John directly, and he choose not to mention this, we have to wonder about his story as told by Peterson. And, it is well known that the process of remembering what happened is both imprecise and of an unfolding nature. What a person has to say about their memories is best understood by reference to where they are in that process.

In my view, the only conclusion that an outsider can legitimately draw as he watches this sad show progress is that all of the parties involved have such an emotional investment in the events in question that their perceptions should not be trusted. And so we will watch with interest as more evidence is put on the table.

As I have noted earlier, it is a shame that Beck did not tone her side of this story down. The real issue here is how the context within which literalist Mormons find themselves can twist the human psyche. Beck is evidence of that. Nibley is as well. And now Peterson has joined the fray offering unwitting fresh evidence of the same thing.

Many who have not read the book will assume that it is a damning rant against Hugh Nibley. It is not. One of Beck's compelling leitmotifs is drawn from a Buddhist legend that shows the journey from child (innocent) to camel (laden with her society's burden) to lion (fighting to free herself from society) to child again (reborn, free and innocent in a new way). Much of what she says about dealing with her father during their extended meeting that provides the superstructure for the book is about this. And she says that at the time of writing, she is a child again – that she had reached the point of forgiveness for her father, while still firmly believing that he abused her. She says, for example,

As absolutely as I oppose what my father did to me, as violently as I would physically attack anyone I caught doing it to another child, I know too much to assume that he could simply have controlled himself. I know how stored horror can torture the mind, how utterly despair can shatter the will. I know that my way of thinking really is similar to my father's, and I know how relentlessly pain can dominate it. Ironically, by passing on his genetic makeup and then sending me to hell in early childhood, my father used both nature and nurture to create one of the few people who can really understand him. (p. 127)

She also said:

I've thought about it a thousand times, the absolute dead-end my father had faced when I was five, the year I suspect he got a fateful assignment from the brethren in Salt Lake City. He was a fifty-two-year old Mormon apologist -- a profession that didn't even exist outside of Utah -- with virtually no possibility of getting a job outside of Mormon-run BYU. With eight children to feed (eight!), what options were open to him? He could either lose his job, his livelihood, his social standing, his bully pulpit, by publicly revealing information that would undermine the very foundations of Mormonism, or he could lie flat out. In a way, I admire him for choosing the only other alternative: he went crazy. (p. 148)

And she describes in some detail how her feelings for her father had passed into understanding, forgiveness, and peace. Again, I regret that her tendency toward hyperbole makes it hard for me to entirely buy this aspect of her story.

Repressed v. Recovered Memory Theory

A lot has been written about how unreliable recovered memories are. See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/life/feature/story/0,13026,1098943,00.html> and <http://slate.msn.com/id/2112746/> for useful summaries.

One of leading experts regarding recovered memory is Elizabeth Loftus. Her website is at <http://faculty.washington.edu/eloftus/> In addition to showing how easy certain types of false "memories" are to implant (like being lost at the mall when you were a little kid), she has shown that in some cases recovered memories should be taken seriously.

A clinical psychologist with whom I have corresponded significantly in reference to Beck's book and the theory of sexual abuse it contains summarizes some of the relevant issues as follows:

"There is a difference between repressed memories that spontaneously resurface, and those which are "recovered.

"Repressed memory is a somewhat controversial topic. However, most psychologists, especially those in applied fields, will agree that repressed memory is real (that's the first debate in this area) and that repressing memory is a coping strategy for dealing with trauma. Repression can occur to various degrees, but tends to only occur in situations where the memory would be too damaging to the individual to deal with at the present time. So, it's filed away and forgotten until such a time as it can be more safely dealt with. However, repressed memories of trauma can still be distressing enough to "leak out" as other psychological symptoms. Children who are sexually abused are VERY likely to repress memories of the abuse (more probably repress memories to some extent than don't). These memories often resurface spontaneously in adulthood when triggered (by entering romantic relationships, having children, re-experiencing stimuli related to the trauma, etc.) When these memories resurface spontaneously THEY CANNOT BE CONSIDERED FALSELY IMPLANTED MEMORIES. These memories are very likely to be accurate, even when minor details are called into question. This type of remembering is not considered very controversial by most psychologists.

"This is different from "recovered memories." The common scenario for a recovered memory looks like this. A woman with vague anxiety and depressive symptoms goes to therapy. She initially denies ever having been sexually molested, but the therapist can find no "cause" for her symptoms. So, some gung-ho therapists continuously suggest

that the client has been molested. The therapist may even recommend hypnosis as a way to "recover" the memory, or some other technique. The more a therapist suggests the abuse, the more pressure the client may feel to remember it, whether or not it occurred. The client continuously recounts the abuse, adding new details every time she shares the memory, until the memory is fully "recovered."

I pause to note that Loftus has written an article that summarizes the tactics of therapists of the type my friend just described. That article can be found at <http://www.csicop.org/si/9503/memory.html>

My friend's summary continues as follows:

"Unlike spontaneous memory recovery, this type of memory recovery is VERY controversial. While a person remembers MORE under hypnosis, he/she has more of BOTH true and false memories. This is a phenomenon known as "hyper-remembering." Additionally, some of the classic experiments in cognitive psychology (done by Elizabeth Loftus) show that false memories are EXTREMELY easy to implant (all I need is a couple of hours and a fake letter from your mama). However not all memories implant with equal ease. False memories of more common events (such as getting lost in a mall) can be implanted in nearly all subjects, while false memories of receiving a rectal enema could not be implanted in even ONE subject. No one knows where false memories of childhood sexual abuse fall on this continuum, but it is theorized that they fall more toward the rectal enema end of the scale, and less toward the "lost in a mall" end of it (again, go to Loftus's research on this one to verify my information)."

"Elizabeth Loftus is the pioneering cognitive psychologist responsible for studying memory, and especially memory implantation. She is the person who developed a laboratory model for inducing false memory and showed how EXTREMELY easy it is to induce many types of false memory, especially memories for which a person already has a likely cognitive script or "schema" to rely upon for constructing a false memory. She also showed that, in terms of implanting the memory of an anal enema, she could not falsely implant that memory in A SINGLE subject. Not all memories are equally implantable. ... [My note: This enema research may have been done by Kathy Pezdek of Claremont Graduate School instead of Loftus – see <http://www.uark.edu/misc/lampinen/read/PFH97.html>]

I note, however, that some of Loftus research that shows how it is possible to induce bizarre, and false, recovered memories in some cases. For example, she describes the case in which a Mr. Ingram, a prominent member of a community, was accused of satanic ritual abuse, and eventually confessed to many bizarre sexual and other crimes in that regard.

"Richard Ofshe, a social psychologist hired by the prosecution to interview Ingram and his family members, decided to test Ingram's credibility. Ofshe had made up a completely fabricated scenario. He told Ingram that two of his children (a daughter and a son) had reported that Ingram had forced them to have sex in front of him. As with the earlier suggestions, Ingram at first could not remember this. But Ofshe urged Ingram to try to think about the scene and try to see it happening, just as the interrogators had done to him earlier. Ingram began to get some visual images. Ingram then followed Ofshe's instructions to "pray on" the scene and try to remember more over the next few hours. Several hours later, Ingram had developed detailed memories and wrote a three-page statement confessing in graphic detail to the scene that Ofshe had invented (

Ofshe, 1992 ;Watters, 1991). Ofshe (1989, 1992) noted that this was not the first time that a vulnerable individual had been made to believe that he had committed a crime for which he originally had no memory and which evidence proved he could not have committed. What is crucial about the Ingram case is that some of the same methods that are used in repressed memory cases were used with Ingram. These include the use of protracted imagining of events and authority figures establishing the authenticity of these events. (see Loftus, "The Reality of Repressed Memory" at <http://faculty.washington.edu/eloftus/Articles/lof93.htm>)

This does not suggest that overrule Kezdek's research, but rather it indicates that the fact that false memories of anal enema's cannot be induced does not indicate the impossibility of inducing specific, bizarre false memories. In the Ofshe case, for example, a tremendous amount of emotional force was exerted on Mr. Ofshe. His memory did not prove a match for such a force. The force used in the Kezdek study was not of this magnitude. I suggest that the Ofshe case may indicate some of the limits of the Kezdek research. I expect that additional research will attempt to define these.

My psychologist friend continues:

"In general, any memories that are spontaneously recovered are statistically as likely to be accurate to the same degree as any other memory, which is to say, only somewhat accurate. However, memories of traumatic events usually have an accuracy that exceeds that of other memories. Memories of trauma are also more enduring than other memories. And there are certain aspects of traumatic memories that have been empirically shown to have nearly perfect accuracy, such as a "weapon focus" in a memory. This speaks to a smaller percentage of false positives [memories of things that did not happen, or "FPs"] in memories of sexual trauma, albeit indirectly.

"In the end, when all the literature on the issue of recovered memories of sexual abuse is taken into consideration it is likely that there are thousands of [true positives – recovered memories of things that did occur or "TPs"] for every one FP, and that the general public's perception of this ratio is highly skewed. In general, it has been empirically demonstrated that people have a tendency to believe that a particular case involves a FP rather than a TP, due to cognitive bias toward victim blaming, in an attempt to feel safer about their personal worlds. This bias has led to many social and legal barriers for victims of abuse. ... The fact that we place such emphasis on the existence of FPs in the instance of sexual abuse memories, and not on, say, FPs in memories of burglary (which are alarmingly more common, and empirically well demonstrated, again refer to Loftus for more on this) is more indicative of social bias, and social dysfunction than on the real statistical occurrence and social impact of FPs in sexual abuse memories.

"When we compare the statistical likelihood of FP memories of sexual abuse, with the statistical likelihood of TP memory being disbelieved, I think it is clear that, as a society, we are worrying about error in the wrong direction."

My friend's views are consistent with those of a well-known expert in this field, Dr. Alan Schefflin of Santa Clara University. He summarizes the research regarding repressed memory as follows:

“Are repressed memories accurate? Both those who argue that repressed memories are always false and those who argue that repressed memories are always true (because, like the fly caught in amber, they are solidified and impervious to later contamination by influence or suggestion) appear to be mistaken. Although the science is limited on this issue, the only three relevant studies conclude that repressed memories are no more and no less accurate than continuous memories (Dalenberg, 1996; Widom and Morris, 1997; Williams, 1995). Thus, courts and therapists should consider repressed memories no differently than they consider ordinary memories.

“The science clearly directs us away from the distracting issue of the existence of repressed memories, and toward the psychologically and legally significant issue of the validity of particular memories. The therapy room and the courtroom both benefit from distinguishing true and false memories (Schefflin, 1998). The science of memory shows that 1) memory is remarkably accurate for the gist of events, and less accurate for peripheral details; 2) all memories, repressed or continually remembered, may be influenced by later events or by the method of retrieval; and 3) all memories, whether implicit or explicit, may exert an influence on behaviour (Schacter, 1999). With a renewed concentration on how memories are retrieved or influenced, therapists and lawyers might again be able to work as associates, not adversaries.” (see <http://www.psychiatrictimes.com/p991137.html>)

Here are a few other quotes from my clinical psychologist friend that are worth considering.

“In fact, 1 in 3 to 1 in 4 women are victims of sexual abuse by the time they reach college age. If a woman claims to have been abused, even though statistically there is EVERY reason to believe she is telling the truth, she will be placed under intense social scrutiny and sanction. Overwhelmingly, women DO NOT make false reports of sexual abuse, b/c there is NOTHING that a victim really gets out of a report except harassment. It is rare to hear of cases where the report was definitively false. So rare there are only a few well-documented cases of this to examine.

“It is, however, EXTREMELY common for the abusers to deny the abuse. They ALMOST ALWAYS do. And, consider that few reports are ever made (1-2% of abuses are reported), and of those reports only a small percentage result in prosecutions (like 1-2%) and of those cases prosecuted only 1-2% result in convictions. Trust me, it is much more the case that, as a society, we are protecting the abusers, and not that we are believing false accusations. ...

Finally, let's knock off all this talk about how [Beck's] "ruining her family" and just trying to "stir up trouble." This is a common form of victim blaming, is almost NEVER the case when a woman reports sexual abuse, but is almost ALWAYS a tactical explanation used by threatened parties for reports of sexual abuse. Most of us don't like to be reminded of the frequency and regularity of childhood sexual abuse. It makes us feel vulnerable, so we discredit the victim rather than deal with our feelings of vulnerability. Whether Beck is telling the truth, whether or not her memories are "real," when we put a lot of energy into discrediting her using such tactics, we harm the 25-33% of women (and lord knows how many men) that are truly victims.”

What we know about the Beck case so far is more consistent with her memory of abuse being spontaneously remembered and hence reliable. However, there are allegations that her memory was recovered with the aid of therapy and in particular, hypnosis. We should also be

aware that Beck recovered her memory during the early 1990s when the “recovered memory” fad was near its peak, and shortly after a rash of incidents of this type in Utah (see http://www.cesnur.org/2001/archive/mi_mormons.htm). Hence, we should not rule out the possibility that even if her recovered memory was not specifically assisted by therapy or hypnosis that it was influenced by things she read in the media or otherwise became aware of. I would also assume that as a sociologist studying at Harvard she had also become familiar with the literature related to this topic.

Another friend with clinical experience related to both sexual abuse and repressed memory has taken me to task for not simply accepting Beck’s story. He says that “sceptics” like me make things unnecessarily hard for survivors of abuse whose very experience should be expected to cause them to suppress the memories.

While I agreed with a lot of his analysis as to why kids who have been abused often repress their memories, I felt I should note how hard it is to nail down what happened, with sufficient precision to in effect pin a crime on someone, when it comes to matters of this type, and how much evidence would need to be assessed in Martha Beck’s case before it would be responsible to do that. That is, it is hard to figure out what happened? Terrifically hard.

By chance, a short time ago I spent half an hour chatting with a family court judge here in Alberta. She told me about some of her recent cases in which child sexual abuse is an issue. This is abuse that is either alleged to be occurring at the time of trial, or within a short time before trial, and is part of the landscape for custody battles. She made a number of comments that were telling.

First, she said that the incidence of this kind of allegation has skyrocketed during the last 15 years. She believes that in a high percentage of the cases the allegations are false, but does not accuse anyone of lying. She is well versed in the memory research. I was surprised, and pleased, by how well informed she was regarding Loftus and other leading researchers. She believes that the emotional turmoil of the divorce and custody battle causes both spouses to use anything they can get their hands on as weapons and warps their perceptions of reality. The kids are caught in the middle and have things suggested to them by well-meaning parents and others. She indicated that most counsellors in the larger centres do a pretty good job avoiding this (because of the publicity people like Loftus gave to the false recovered memory thing years ago), but in the smaller centres some of the counselling is off the wall.

As I listened to this wise woman I thought that if it is so hard for a highly trained, objective person with the tools of the court at her disposal, whose job it is every day to find out “what happened”, to get comfortable with what happened six months ago (or even a few weeks ago) in a sexual abuse allegation case, it seems a real stretch for those who are inclined toward certainty in something like the Beck case before the relevant evidence has even been gathered or tested.

I am sensitive to the charge that by taking the approach I am I will re-victimize people who have been harmed. I think that we should take care to protect those who need protecting. My judge friend errs on the side of protecting children who might be at risk. That is the right thing to do with phenomena about which we cannot be reasonably certain. And all of us should be educated as to how our minds work so that we can make better decisions as to what and when to believe, and of what and when to be more sceptical.

Sleep Paralysis

I think that the alien abduction research is relevant to the assessment of Martha's credibility. For example, Harvard's McNally and others (see <http://cms.psychologytoday.com/articles/index.php?term=PTO-20030527-000002>) have shown that certain types of sleep paralysis and hypnopompic hallucinations are likely to be perceived as alien abductions and produce physical symptoms (like physiological stress) that are stronger than those manifested by soldiers suffering from post traumatic stress disorder after war experiences.

The sleep paralysis experience produces a consistent set of symptoms: Terror; the feeling of a presence; the sensation of pressure on the chest; the sensation of being held down; etc. The experience often includes the perception of sexual abuse. Some of the stories told by the alleged alien abductees are hair-raising in that regard – tales of alien/human breeding projects, etc.

While I don't suggest that Martha suffers from sleep paralysis, and do not wish to in any way disparage the trauma of her experience, the alien abduction line of research provides evidence that what most of us are confident are experiences manufactured the mind alone (alien abductions) seem "more real than real" to those who have them, and leave physiological evidence that is consistent with the subjects' reported experience.

It has been noted that since our perceptive systems are designed to take input from the external world and use it to interpret that world, it makes sense that when certain aspects of the perceptive system itself malfunction, we would interpret that as messages about the external world. Given the kind of stress Martha was under because of the emotional abuse I think it is clear that she suffered, and given her powerful and creative mind, it is possible that she went through a more real than real experience of the type just noted.

We should also consider the way in which memories are formed. As noted above, Elizabeth Loftus and others have clearly documented the manner in which all memories (not just "recovered" memories) are actively reconstructed using experiences that occurred after the remembered event. Without suggesting dishonesty, it is wise to be sceptical of any memory that has powerful emotional content, has important implications for the person who is remembering and others, and does not have solid third party verification.

I do not suggest that Martha was wrong to tell her story. It is her experience and at a minimum it shows that the bizarre nature of how she was raised could twist a wonderful mind into the type of pretzel she describes. However, those of us who hear her story should in my view be slow to accept it as truth until a variety of evidentiary hurdles have been passed that she has not to this point been able to pass, and in my view will not be able to pass unless this matter goes to court. And even then I am doubtful that the most important evidence will come out. These events happened too long ago to be properly dealt with now.

I was fascinated to learn that one of McNally's Harvard colleagues, the recently deceased John Mack (see <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/aliens/johnmack.html>) had become convinced of the reality of alien abductions as a result of research similar to that conducted by McNally. This shows how bright, well-informed, well-qualified people can differ regarding things of this nature, and then get locked into paradigms that seem to make little sense to virtually all outsiders. Mack effectively destroyed his academic credibility at the end of a long and otherwise distinguished career by taking the position he did regarding the alien abductee research.

McNally also notes how surprised he was at how the people he studied greeted the conclusions to which his research pointed. He thought that they would be thrilled to find that there was a plausible explanation for their experience that did not require them to believe that they have been abducted by, raped by, tortured by, etc. aliens. To his surprise, almost all of his patients were highly resistant to his explanation of their experience. Their perception of what happened to them was so real that it overrode what his data indicated, and they felt a deep sense of loss when confronted with the possibility that something they believed to be more real than anything else they had experienced was an illusion.

While McNally did not mention this in the lecture I heard him deliver, my reading with regard to cognitive dissonance, "biases" and related areas of psychology indicates that one of our deepest human needs is to be able to trust our perceptions. If we can't trust our perceptions, for example, we would be unable to make decisions and often decisiveness is more important than accuracy of decision to our survival. To admit that something that had seemed so compelling was the result of a brain hiccup of some kind is hence existentially threatening, and so very hard to do. I also believe this is part of what prevented me for so long from reinterpreting some of my experiences that seemed to indicate that Mormonism was "true".

McNally also summarized the kinds of people who tend to have alien abduction experiences. They tend to have New Age beliefs, familiarity with alien abduction stories, elevated fantasy proclivities, have experienced sleep paralysis or hypnopompic hallucinations, and they intended to have engaged in memory recovery therapy sessions. Some of these factors are consistent with what little I know about Martha Beck. Her beliefs tend toward the New Age end of the spectrum. She is intimately familiar with all kinds of the lore from which her experience draws. She has a powerful mind and her writing shows a tendency toward hyperbole, which may indicate a well developed ability to fantasize. She has an "over the top" personality in a variety of ways. She has engaged in memory recovery sessions. I do not know if she has experienced sleep paralysis, but this is certainly a question that would be asked if this matter went to court in the context indicated below.

The friend with clinical experience related to sexual abuse and recovered memories was particularly upset with my reference to the alien abduction research relative to Martha Beck. He suggested that the "alien abduction" scenario gives the argument against recovered memories an unwarranted and pejorative twist.

I told him that I thought he and I were emphasizing different aspects of the alien abduction research. McNally started his research in that area looking at the legitimacy of recovered memories and ended up studying sleep paralysis. That is the axis that interests me, because there is a link there that has strong predictive ability. If someone shows the physical symptoms related to sleep paralysis and has certain terrifying memories, we should be more sceptical of what they have remembered. That does not mean that we dismiss their story, but we should be more sceptical about it based on the probable connection between their symptomology and a well known medical condition.

Also, when we find people who exhibit the sleep paralysis symptoms, we should be sceptical of both of their reports of alien abductions (that often include sexual components) as well as their reports of sexual abuse at the hands of humans. Consistency, it seems to me, demands this.

On the other hand, where the symptoms related to sleep paralysis are not present, we should not use what the research in that area has shown to cast more doubt than already exists on those who report sexual abuse. The important thing here is that we have some traction

regarding sleep paralysis in phenomena that can be medically tested. If we can use this, great. If not, it is not helpful as a diagnostic tool.

At this point, as far as I am aware, the sleep paralysis hypothesis has not been advanced relative to Martha Beck. Were it to be advanced, she could be tested for the relevant medical conditions now and her history taken as to the relevant time to see if it is likely that he had those conditions then. Perhaps this approach is helpful, and perhaps not. But at a minimum what we have here is an indication that there is yet another relevant type of evidence that has not been collected.

And I note that one of the first things one learns as a lawyer is that your client's case is usually at its best just after you have heard it from her. This is not because all your clients are liars, but rather because it is the nature of human beings it to perceive reality so as to justify their day-to-day actions and overall way of life. So, as the other side's story comes out and evidence is tested, I ALWAYS expect my client case to weaken.

The alien abduction stuff is also relevant because it shows how utterly compelling events that only happen in our heads can be. We should expect some experiences of this nature of be utterly convincing. This is a cautionary flag that we should raise for all to see, not just with regard to Beck but with regard to all life events that have powerful emotional content, such as many linked to our Mormon experience. They are the ones most likely to be misinterpreted along axes most likely to justify our dominant social drivers. This is what puts Mormons into denial regarding many aspects of their history and culture, for example. Again, I don't suggest that Martha is doing this. I am pointing out a broad based phenomena that affect the standards of justified belief with regard to particular phenomena. Anyone who comes forward with the kind of allegation Martha has should bear a heavy onus of proof. Until she has met it, the responsible thing to do if one does not have to make a decision is to hold fire. And I say this with the utmost respect for her personally and the work she has done and is going on various fronts.

This may be a little like Mike Quinn (who insists Mormonism's main claims are literally true after all Mormonism has put him through), or Newton for that matter (who was using numerology to work out the date of Christ's second coming at the same time he was revolutionizing science).

That is, Martha Beck's reputation and utility as a scholar or person does not stand or fall in my mind on whether she is accurate in her recollection of what happened between her and her father. History is full of people who made profoundly important contributions in certain areas while being utterly mistaken about other (usually emotionally laden) things, while acting in good faith.

So, overall, Martha's story skims across deep water. Martha is sincere and believable in person as is noted below. I have no doubt as to her sincerity or her belief that she was sexually abused. She was clearly abused at least emotionally and she may well have been sexually abused just as she indicates. And she is a powerful story teller with a tendency to drift into hyperbole.

Cognitive Dissonance All Round

Cognitive dissonance (or denial) research is relevant to this discussion for many of the same reasons it is relevant to Mormonism at large. See <http://home.mccue.cc:10000/bob/documents/rs.do%20smart%20mormons%20make%20mormonism%20true.pdf> starting at page 37 for a summary of how this works.

Beck's family has a huge investment in their father, emotionally abusive though he may have been. This is indicated, for example, by the widely reported statement of Beck's brother Thomas at Hugh's memorial service to the effect that their father was foreordained in the pre-existence to the "council of prophets" and that he had carried out his responsibilities in that regard through his academic work and departed to take up his place with his prophet brethren. All but the faithful Mormons will simply shake their heads over this one. This, in my view, is indicative of the kind of magical thinking that pervades much of the thinking around this issue within the Nibley family. How could one of the "council of prophets" have done what Martha alleges? Impossible. Full stop to all real analysis right there.

It is well known that the most vigorous defenders of abusive husbands are the wives they abuse, until a point of critical mental mass is reached and the women in question become able to understand what has happened to them. Until this happens, they are not able to process their own experience. The recovery of repressed memories is a common – almost routine – part of a woman (or child) getting into the psychological space that permits the reality of certain gruesome experiences to be processed. Our minds are set up to protect our sanity by simply blocking certain difficult things from understanding. The literature on sexual and other forms of abuse within families is replete with data that supports this position.

In the case of the Nibley family, exhibit number one with respect to cognitive dissonance may well be the conclusion of Peterson's 25-page critique of "Leaving the Saints". As I have already indicated, Peterson contradicts Beck in a variety of ways, asks some good questions and in my view advances the ball in terms of outlining issues that require consideration. Then Peterson builds to his final crescendo, and there indicates that personal histories are often a reflection of what a person has become instead of an accurate telling of her past. Fair enough. I would agree. But his final, and presumably most important sentence that is positioned to ring longest in his readers' ears, is this assessment of Beck's effort to describe her family life:

"To retell her past in such a distorted way may be nothing more than a heartbreaking attempt to justify her leaving the saints."

Of course!! The Mormon Church is God's one and only true church on Earth; therefore Beck could not have left it because she decided in good faith on justifiable and easily understandable grounds that it is false; and therefore Beck must have invented (consciously or otherwise) a story of incest to avoid facing the fact that she has condemned herself to eternal damnation! Why didn't I think of that!

It is tragic that many of the few faithful Mormons who are still reading at this point will agree in the main with what I just wrote, while most of the rest of the world simply shakes their heads in disbelief. Peterson is an obviously intelligent man who appears to be an unwitting intellectual hostage to his faith. I cannot think of a more objectively baseless, ridiculous assertion, as rife with cliché as anything Beck wrote about Provo, BYU or Boston, as Peterson's conclusion. It is in my view a highly probable indicator of a full-blown case of cognitive dissonance induced denial.

My overall take on Peterson is as follows. After bringing forward reams of useful data, he concludes by inviting those reading his review to believe that Martha's entire book can be dismissed as her attempt to justify her change in religious belief, with the unstated but clear reference back to his earlier indication that Martha and John left Mormonism because they are gay. The fact that he can conclude that Martha's book is a justification for her change in

religious belief tells me that I should not trust his perspective across the broad range of issues that question his religious beliefs. Much of Martha's book does that.

So, Peterson has advanced the ball by raising legitimate questions, some of which Martha has now addressed. However, in his conclusion he gave away much more than I suspect he thought he had about his own premises and how difficult the emotional terrain is where he finds himself. His account is in many respects the polar opposite of Martha's. The same is true of the account her family gives at the "defence" site noted above. They at once say that they are committed to rigorous intellectual honesty and analysis, and pronounce with certainty that their father did not do what Martha alleges. Honest intellectual enquiry does not at this point justify any certain conclusion.

Despite the fact that they may be in denial, if the Nibley family would be required under oath to probe their memories they may well produce data that other, less biased, observers will interpret quite differently than they do. For example, perhaps they will acknowledge that Nibley was well known for his early morning dissociative episodes, but insist that those have nothing to do with Beck's allegations. Or they may acknowledge that the concerns regarding Nibley's own childhood sexual abuse were real, but insist that this has nothing to do with Beck's allegations; etc.

Mormonism has a huge investment in Nibley. The faithful Mormons who worked with him are in a position similar to his family members, and under the probing of a competent (I almost said "good", which would be an oxymoron) lawyer may well also produce objective data that outsiders will interpret quite differently than would the faithful.

If a lawsuit comes of this, it will be an interesting microcosm of the overall Mormon debate. With regard to Mormonism in general, the same objective data regarding the BofA, Book of Mormon, Smith's history of deception etc. is put on the table before both Mormons and non-Mormons. Almost all faithful Mormons dismiss this information to the extent that it conflicts with the version of Mormon foundational history in which they believe. This story is radically different from the facts laid out in a probabilistic fashion to the extent the best historians can so lay them out. A small percentage of faithful Mormons actually take the historians' version of events seriously and wrestle with it. Most of them accept the Mormon apologists' positions (like the JS papyri inspired Smith to receive revelation from God as to the real story of Abraham in Egypt). And, a small percentage of the faithful who encounter the full story regarding Smith, the BofA, etc. decide that Mormonism has been falsified to their satisfaction, and move on with their lives. That is what I have done. Precisely the same pattern of behaviour is observed within innumerable other conservative and quasi-cult religious groups, such as the FLDS, JW's, Seventh Day Adventists, Moonies, etc.

And how do non-Mormons respond to the Mormon story, as the historians tell it? I am not aware of a single non-Mormon who when presented with the entire story has accepted it as "true" and joined the Mormon Church. There are likely a few somewhere who have done this, but for every one of them there are at least thousands who dismiss the story as ridiculous. Mormons make themselves feel better about this by speaking about the lack of faith; the sinful nature; etc. of those who cannot understand the "truth" of Mormonism, and the faithful, "favoured of God" etc. nature of those who are Mormon. But when one looks at the big picture pattern of religious belief and related behaviour, it becomes clear that Mormonism is nothing special. It is just another little religion that was started by a charismatic, smart guy and then used by those who came after him for their own purposes. And once a group of people gets to a certain size, those within it who are sufficiently conditioned tend to believe the story their group tells, and almost

everyone else gives the whole thing the bum's rush. This pattern of behaviour is as old, and as unremarkable, as dirt except for those of us who have had it seared into our consciousness by personal experience.

Faithful Mormons who are trying to assess Beck's story would do well to remember two things related to what I just wrote. First, they have such a huge investment in Hugh Nibley that they are as likely to realistically assess Beck's story about him as they are Joseph Smith's story. That is, Beck v. Nibley is a matter of faith for them, not a matter of finding out what really happened.

And most importantly, the jury at any trial that occurs related to Martha Beck's allegations of sexual abuse at the hands of Hugh Nibley will not be faithful Mormons. They will not wear the magical worldview glasses that cause most Mormons to either believe that it is impossible that Smith was a deceiver of the first order or that if he was a deceiver, it was because God told him to deceive. That is as far as the vast majority of non-Mormons get with this story. There is a big eye roll at this point, and it is "game over".

The jury at any Beck-Nibley trial that occurs will be neither Mormon nor anti-Mormon. The jury selection process is designed to find people who are not biased one way or the other. A jury so composed will likely find Beck's theory fascinating, and if she is able to bring evidence to support a reasonable part of her theory as I have outlined it, there is a very good chance that jury will find that it is more likely than not that she was sexually abused by her father and so her defence will be successful. The jury will not be incapable of conceiving that Nibley may have abused Beck as are most Mormons for the same reason that most Mormons are incapable of conceiving that Smith may have been just have another con man made good whose power base was then taken over by other people, who then used it for their own purposes.

Martha in Person

Several people have either told me, or written publicly, about their personal impressions after having heard Martha speak about her experience with sexual abuse as described in "Leaving the Saints". The most recent was a former PGA professional golfer who lives in Arizona and has Mormon connections. He described Martha's presentation in Tempe, Arizona was electrifying and utterly compelling.

Because I have it at hand, here is something Pulitzer Prize winning political cartoonist Steven Benson wrote with regard to his impressions of Martha's story that is consistent with many other things I have heard:

Martha Beck is honest, believable, articulate, intelligent, talented, persuasive and credible. I have known her for over 10 years, having first come into contact with her and her then-husband John when they left the Mormon Church in 1993.

Martha lives in the Phoenix area. Mary Ann and I have been to her home, she has been to ours. We have visited for long hours about her life and her experiences.

I have spent a considerable amount of time personally talking with Martha about her book (which I have). I regard her account of her sexual abuse at the hands of her father to be absolutely accurate, true, reliable and evidentiarily sound--both as she has laid it out in her book and as she has relayed it to me personally in great detail.

Martha's explicit descriptions of what took place, and when, at the hands of her father are not only spoken from the heart, I have no doubt that they were truly experienced by her. Attempts by some of her family and other Mormon apologists to discredit her are, in my opinion, baseless, vindictive and, in some cases, driven by greed and jealousy.

It is important to emphasize here that Martha's claim of sexual abuse at the hands of her father is not based solely on recovered memory.

She has reiterated to me quite strongly that ever since she was a small child she has had memories of experiences related to her abuse by her father which she was eventually able to put into proper perspective and context.

Combined with that, Martha has compelling evidence of severe physical trauma and scarring in her genital area that, contrary to some attempts at explanation, did not come from playing on the jungle gym as a little girl.

Martha compares the basis for her contention that she was sexually molested by her father to a three-legged stool. One leg of the stool is recovered memory, another leg of the stool are memories she has always had and the third leg of the stool is physical evidence of significant sexual injury.

This combination of evidence has also been a subject about which I have spoken with one of Martha's cousins, who firmly supports the veracity of Martha's claims and who has been instrumental in defending Martha against efforts to discredit her.

Amazingly, for all she has been through, Martha speaks of her horrible abuse experiences with dignity, calmness, candour and stoicism, but I have seen the anger spark in her eyes and heard her voice rise in indignation when she sees people attack her character, malign her account of what happened to her and dishonestly or ignorantly assail the people who mean the most to her.

I never met Hugh Nibley, so I cannot speak from any personal experience about him. However, from what Martha has told me, while he in some ways was a kind and good man, in other ways he was deeply psychologically unbalanced, emotionally scarred, fundamentally burdened with self-doubt, frustratingly mired in denial, seeking throughout in his life for approval from the leaders of the Mormon Church and its members and absolutely capable of committing the sexual abuse that Martha describes as having occurred.

I trust Martha implicitly, respect her immensely and consider her to be a true friend.

However, as noted below, sincerity of belief does not mandate reality, and nor does one's ability to electrify an audience.

Potential Lawsuit

The only evidence for Beck's allegations of abuse at this point is her word. Her family has indicated that they may file a lawsuit against her (see <http://www.hughnibleydefense.com/gseo/index.html>) and is soliciting donations. If a lawsuit proceeds, Beck will be provided with the need and opportunity to collect such evidence as is

available to support her case. That is what lawsuits do – force people to collect evidence to back up their claims. If you don't want to have evidence collected, you don't start a lawsuit.

I am not sure what form the lawsuit may take. I am not a litigation expert, and am not a US lawyer. However, I understand that a lawsuit for defamation against a deceased person may not be possible and Nibley passed away in February. So, Nibley's estate could likely not mount such a suit. Perhaps Martha's siblings will allege that they have been personally defamed or that their reputations have otherwise been damaged. For some ideas as to how this may go, see <http://writ.news.findlaw.com/dean/20040312.html>.

There is another factor that will weigh heavily on the faithful who have been invited to fund Nibley's "defence". A lawsuit will bring Hugh Nibley's role in the development of the Mormon apologetic position regarding the BofA under the litigation microscope with Mormon funding on one side and a huge publisher on the other. In matters of this type, lots of money means lots of information. It would be astonishing if a vast amount of previously unpublished data did not surface during the course of that process. Given Nibley's foundational role in the Mormon apologetic enterprise relative to the BofA (the controversy related to which most Mormons have either forgotten about or of which they have never heard), the data produced could go to the root of that process. For example, how did Hugh get his "good" copy of the JS papyri in 1965, and why was he aware of it at least as early as 1962 while the Mormon Church feigned surprise at its "discovery" in 1966?

Much of the theory set out above amounts to speculation as to the state of Nibley's mind. To what extent was he stressed by the BofA defence? To what extent was he stressed by his war experiences? To what extent was he stressed by his literalist beliefs (and what were those beliefs)? To what extent was he stressed by his view that sex was for the purpose of procreation and the fact that he and his wife had finished procreating (and hence finished having sex?) over a year before his alleged abuse of Martha started?

Some of the evidence, however, does not relate to Nibley. Where did Beck's vaginal scarring come from? Did a doctor at Harvard think she was not a virgin at age 17? Is there a likely connection between her anorexia and suicidal tendencies as a teenager, and childhood abuse, or are those indications (as her family now says) of an unstable personality that should lead people who read of this story to simply dismiss her out of hand as an untrustworthy person? Did Beck's mother guess without prompting that Nibley sexually abused Beck? Did Beck's mother regularly speak about Nibley's probable sexual abuse at the hands of his mother? Did other people infer the same thing about Nibley and his mother? There are a host of facts to be pinned down, and many potentially relevant sources of information. And it is my experience with law suits that when one really starts to dig, all kinds of unexpected information (both pro and con any given position) pops up. For anyone interested in Mormon apologetics, a Nibley – Beck lawsuit is likely to produce a treasure trove of information.

A lawsuit would not disclose the "truth" as to whether Nibley abused Beck, but would it would stress test the important evidence and given the nature of that evidence (see <http://www.sunstoneonline.com/Download/book-review.pdf> for a reasonable summary of some of it) would in my view likely increase in a significant way the prospect of determining what happened on a probabilistic basis, which is the best we can hope for. Having published her book, Beck has volunteered for that painful process. Again, I can't imagine the she and her publisher did this without carefully weighing the prospect of a lawsuit and how that would likely play out.

Once the degree of Nibley's mental dysfunction related to factors such as those outlined above is pinned down to the extent possible, the next question is how (if at all) these factors contributed to the bizarre behaviour Beck alleges he displayed during the relevant time. Did he in fact have regular dissociative episodes at about 5 am? Did he have many dissociative episodes related to his war experience? Did Beck's mother share her concern with other people about Nibley's sexual abuse at the hands of his own mother with the frequency Martha alleges? etc.

A lot of data would have to be gathered to assess the merits of Beck's claims, and the merits of her family's dismissal of them. Much of that data will be in Nibley's private papers and the heads and private papers of his family members and those who worked with him on the BofA project. Much of this would be accessible if a lawsuit goes ahead.

If reasonable factual certainty could be achieved through a trial, a healing process may occur as a result. That would be a good thing in my view. And, as I noted above, the information produced by the process has the likelihood of opening what will feel like wounds for other people, which will facilitate a healing process of another kind that is also of great importance.

Mythology

Joseph Smith became an icon; a myth; used for the purposes icons and myths are always used – to attract, retain and harness the energy of people who need meaning and social stability in order to make sense out of life. See Prothero, "American Jesus – How the Son of God Became a National Icon" (reviewed at <http://www.yalereviewofbooks.com/archive/winter05/review04.shtml.htm>) for a summary of how this process works using Jesus' various uses within American culture (including a description of the various ways in which Mormons have used him). Smith's real history bears little resemblance to the story faithful Mormons are told about him; his myth. Hugh Nibley has become an integral part of that mythmaking process, which is ironic given his many writings that have attempted to tar others with this brush (see "The Mythmakers", for example).

I, for one, would love to see how the myth of Hugh Nibley would fare under the bright lights of a well-funded lawsuit. Consider, for example, reports of what was said at Hugh's funeral. For example, it has been noted that Thomas Hugh Nibley, Hugh's son, proclaimed during his eulogy that his father was part of the "council of the prophets" in the pre-existence and that his father's job was to support and defend all of the other prophets that have come and gone on the earth. He spoke passionately, forcefully, unequivocally, and with great seriousness, quite different in mood or tone than those that spoke before him at the funeral. He spoke of little else, but that he was convinced that his father was a part of this "council of the prophets".

This is a myth in the classic sense. And, because of the intimate connection between Hugh Nibley (the ancient records expert) and Joseph Smith (the translator of ancient records), the myth of Joseph Smith would receive a prominent second billing at a Nibley – Beck libel lawsuit. That, I also think, would be healthy.

How did Rueben Clark (a former member of the Mormon First Presidency) put it? Something like "If we have the truth, it cannot be harmed by investigation. If we have not the truth, it ought to be harmed."

Conclusion

Martha Beck's book is a tragedy for the Nibley family and an act of personal cleansing for Beck at the same time. I know how that feels. It is dangerous, painful and liberating to give voice to what you perceive to be secrets that go to the root of the power others have held over you.

I respect Beck's right to speak publicly about deeply held convictions regarding what her father did to her. Libel and other forms of lawsuits are the force in our society that constrains such talk. As noted above, it would be naïve to think that Beck's editors and publishers did not carefully consider that risk before publishing her book. Large book publishers are experts when it comes to dealing with the risk of lawsuits.

It is my view that this book is primarily useful as a close, raw, well-written (if hyperbolic), look at the process that occurs when a bright, sensitive human being undergoes massive emotional trauma and a change of faith. It is not, in my view, a good guide to what Mormon communities or life at Harvard are like. The book uses too much hyperbole to be useful for an outsider (that is, non-Mormon) in that regard. That part of the book felt to me like not-quite-funny cliché. However, Beck's use of hyperbole regarding the process of spiritual transformation creates a useful caricature of faith (positive and negative) that may help Mormons and other conservatively religious people discern hard to hear voices within their own souls, and so help them to become more aware of the nature and effect of their religious beliefs.

Mormons often wonder why people like Martha Beck can't leave Mormonism, and then "leave it alone". I see the writing of "Leaving the Saints" as a combination of emotional enema and a form of altruistic behaviour that has been extensively studied in human and other animal populations (See for example David Sloan Wilson, "Darwin's Cathedral"). Evolution seems to have bred into us a desire to warn our social group of danger, and we often feel impelled prepared to pay a cost that can only be justified by reference to the benefits that our warning is likely to confer on others. That is, we are prepared to suffer consequences that seem far greater than any benefit we might individually gain as a result of issuing our warning. People like Martha Beck, I believe, are similar in this regard to the bird at the edge of the flock that happens to first spot the approaching, predatory hawk, and instinctively calls out a warning, and by so doing attracts the hawk's special attention. Studies within human populations as to how cheaters are punished also show this pattern. That is, the punishment meted out to a cheater will often cost the person who delivers it much more than he can expect to gain personally as a result, but warns others of the presence of a cheater which tends to make future cheating less likely and so provides benefits to the group as a whole.

That having been said, Martha Beck's reasons for writing, "Leaving the Saints" are likely inscrutable from even (or perhaps particularly) her vantage point. And some of the reasons for which people will read this book may be as murky. However, despite its flaws, I believe that there is enough in "Leaving the Saints" that many who pick it up will have a hard time putting it down. I particularly encourage anyone who thinks this book may be an elaborate ruse on Beck's part to justify her departure from Mormonism to give their head a shake. Nothing so elaborate is required. All it takes is reading a little Mormon history and asking yourself if you would buy so much as a vacuum cleaner from someone with the track record of deception Joseph Smith had. If not, why would you trust Smith regarding arguably the most important matters in life when he had the need to continue deceiving his religious followers, told stories that mostly could not be verified, and even at that was shown to be consciously deceptive on so many occasions? His religious followers were, in the end, just like the people who he persuaded to hire him to find buried treasure on the basis that he had seen it in vision hiding beneath the surface of their

land. He never found any of the treasure he purported to see, but became very adept at telling gripping stories about why he didn't find the treasure to keep the con going for as long as possible. His story telling skills were put to good use during his next career, that of Prophet, Seer and Revelator of God.

A mid-20 year old woman who is a friend of one of my daughter's called me several months ago after spending most of a day throwing up. She had just read her first large whack of real Mormon history and this was her reaction. She is a convert, the only Mormon in her family, a returned missionary and has sacrificed immensely for Mormonism. She was heart broken and physically ill, as was I while going through the same experience. The trauma we experienced is not unusual for those who have "woken up" after having been utterly committed members of the Mormon Church. This is part of Joseph Smith's legacy, or perhaps better put, the legacy of those who have used him as an icon to maintain their power and influence over a trusting group of people. Martha Beck's sad story is part of that legacy as well, as is that of the Laffertys (see Jon Krakauer, "Under the Banner of Heaven"). The human wreckage caused by the type of dogmatic belief Mormon uses to control people will become more visible as the Internet continues to accelerate the collision between reality as disclosed by history and science continues to escalate within the Mormon community courtesy of the Internet.

And finally, to return to Martha's allegation of incest, in my view it is ill advised to draw any conclusions at this point. There is simply not enough evidence to justify the leap from "plausible" to "real". And I said the same thing to a newspaper editor who wrote to me recently about the same issue. It was his opinion that Martha's book was incredible; that her story did not hold water; that Hugh came off looking like someone who bore his daughter's madness with dignity; etc. I outlined for him the evidence in support of Martha's case, said that I believed it to be plausible and that it should not be dismissed out of hand, but that it was not strong enough for me to accept her story as an accurate account of real events without further evidence and testing of the evidence already on the table.

And as noted above, at the same time I find myself in the odd position of defending the agnostic position regarding Beck's story against smart people like my psychologist friend who thinks Beck has more than made out her case. This seems to be far to certain a conclusion to reach based on the extant evidence.

As is usually the case these days, when I see certainty where I don't believe it to be warranted, I look for emotional issues that might be clouding otherwise clear minds.