

WHY RITUAL “MAKES SENSE”

By Dan Wotherspoon

At first blush, the word “ritual” doesn’t usually conjure much excitement.

We often connect it with words like repetitive, simplistic, boring, and strange.

Yet ritual persists in many forms, even in the very secular United States where we still have many ceremonies filled with familiar, almost to the point of being thought of as “essential,” elements. We note with quite ritualized and highly symbolic language and actions, clothing, and prescribed sequences many, many things ranging from presidential inaugurations to graduations to wedding and funeral rites. In Mor-

monism, we add even more rituals: blessings, baptisms, sacraments, ordinations, temple ceremonies, and even extended, quite ritualized times such as missionary service or other callings in which we are “set apart” to play particular roles or perform functions not asked of us outside these specific structures.

I believe that most of us sense that rituals are in many ways useful, that they provide something

positive for participants—whether it be personal life markers (such as in various “rites of passage” within our life journeys inside particular communities) or chances to formally express our desires and values, or aiding a community in its need to recognize changes from one state of affairs to another (such as a new political administration, a new person now credentialed to move into certain types of roles, or a group com-

“CHRONOS/KAIROS,” BY KELLY BROOKS



ing to terms with the fact that someone important in our communal or personal lives is no longer present with us). Still, if you're like me as someone who highly values rationality and wants whatever we are a part of to in some way "make sense" to us, I am guessing you have at one time asked, like I once did, why ritual, even though helpful, is so darn strange, so out of character with other life moments and activities.

Early on in my study of religion in graduate school, pretty much everything powerful about religion began to fall away for me (at least, I had stopped believing that its power necessarily came because of intercourse with God or some other transcendent source). But even while this was happening in my intellectual life, I was still maintaining my Mormon praxis, including temple attendance, and I couldn't help but notice that participating in temple rites still had an effect on me. Even though I had stopped believing that the specific events or characters depicted in the temple endowment ritual were historical, I recognized that I felt lighter, happier, and more ennobled and empowered after participating in it. What could be going on, I thought? My appreciation of the seeming incongruence of these thoughts with my own experiences led me into a serious study of the nature of ritual that ultimately did end up centering primarily on questions about ritual empowerment: Why does it "work" on us the way it does? Why, following ritual participation, do we often feel more centered, refreshed, excited and able to take on life's challenges? And, especially, as I hinted earlier, what rela-

tionship does ritual have with our rational minds, because limited purely to rationality, ritual certainly does not "make sense." What I came to discover through my studies and in my own continued experiences with ritual, is that its refusal to play in "rational" realms is *exactly* why it is so effective!

But let's not stop there, and this is the primary argument of this article: even though it might not fully add up for our rational minds, there is still a method to ritual's madness. Given the purposes ritual serves and the aspects of our human experience that it most clearly affects, and even acknowledging its many and dizzying varieties, ritual has a logic of its own. It makes its own kind of sense.

THE DIVERSE BUT UNIFIED NATURE OF RITUAL

SO WHAT IS ritual? My primary focus here leads me to focus on it as a set of deliberate actions that attempt to create, carve out, or in some way differentiate certain moments from the normal flow of time, space, and thought. In its attempts to create these times and spaces apart from day-to-day structures, it can employ such things as special gestures, poses, postures, repetitive actions in carefully orchestrated sequences, breath/food/sex/body disciplines and modification, and physical re-location. Ritual is often tied to a group's foundational myths, employing some of its richest characters (gods, demons, angels, tricksters, cultural heroes, ancestors) and symbols. Informed by these larger framings about the divine or primordial forces or character of the

world in which we inhabit, a group's or person's rituals take many forms: prayer, meditation, dancing, drumming, singing/chanting, role-playing, deprivations, or its opposite: indulgences, sometimes related to certain foods and drinks (even psychotropic or other kinds of drugs) or types of sexual practices and/or flirtations with things considered in other circumstances to be taboo. Ritual also often involves sacred objects, special clothing, taking on new names or mythic identities, and the use of specialized, often highly stylized, language.

Tying back to the original definition above, all these features and the wildly divergent forms ritual can take remove from the forefront our regular flow of thoughts and, instead, work toward helping us feel and experience, to let the energies and perspectives that are present at a level below everyday thought and language to rise to the surface. Rationality and language and powerful social structures have important roles to play in our lives, but ritual participation is a time for the "non-rational" to do its balancing work. As I recall Krista Tippett once suggesting, a robust approach to life must recognize a place for "both poetry and physics, scripture and science, alleluiah and analysis."

CHRONOS vs. KAIROS. The ancient Greeks came to distinguish between two modes of time. Most familiar to us is what they referred to as *chronos* time. It is time that can be measured by seconds, minutes, hours, weeks, months, years. It is quantifiable. It marches inevitably forward—and, for us, toward our death. Today's

words, “chronological” and “anachronistic” have their roots in this term and its attendant meanings. So does “chronic.” Most of us are chronically immersed in *chronos* time.

The second time mode the Greeks labeled *kairos*. From their study of rhetoric and argumentation, this term first became applied to the “opportune” or perfect moment to make one’s point in a debate or to prove one’s argument. Later, however, it grew in usage to be applied to moments of time that feel pregnant with potential, moments when anything is possible, a time of expectation, moments in which light or truth might break through in either life- or history-changing ways. In religious language, one might describe *kairos* as the time when God, or the eternal, is closer, intersecting with the temporal, attempting to break through. In short, then, *kairos* is the quality of a moment, while *chronos* is a quantity of moments. If we push the notion of *kairos* time a bit more, we might suggest that it is a recognition that moments do arise occasionally that seem to give more life to life. Ritual participation is one of the most effective ways to lead us out of *chronos* and into *kairos*.

RITUAL STRUCTURE

IN ITS ATTEMPT to help its participants step out of the normal flow of time and into a more unpredictable and differently structured mode (often thought of as more holy or sacred), rituals consist of three phases. They begin with actions that indicate separation from the world; then they immerse their participants in

a liminal time and/or space (the ritual’s main phase); and they conclude with acts of re-integration into the ordinary flow of life. If the ritual is successful in its efforts to take participants into a *kairos* mode, they rejoin the world having greater clarity or energy.

PHASE ONE: ACTS OF SEPARATION. The initial act of separating oneself from the ordinary world often involves physically relocating oneself—to a forest, mountain, another building, or perhaps simply to another room, or even to a special place within a room—anywhere that is designated by an individual or a group as set apart or sacred. It also often involves changes of posture (kneeling, prostrating, taking on meditative or yogic positions, facing a particular direction), changes of clothing, alterations to one’s body or hair, or the removal of jewelry or other signifiers of one’s normal status or individuality. These acts indicate *I am no longer the person I was immediately before this began. I am entering into a frame of consciousness in which I leave behind previous concerns, ego, willfulness, and social status that might keep me at a distance from the Divine or my fellow human beings. I am ready to invite wisdom and energies that my day-to-day foci often obscure, things that often go unnoticed in the hustle and bustle of life.*

PHASE TWO: LIMINALITY. Now separated from the ordinary world, participants enter what French ethnographer Arnold van Gennep named as ritual’s “liminal” phase.¹ The term is drawn from the Latin word “limen,” which means a threshold

(doorway or porch area). In the case of “rites of passage” (such as puberty rituals, births, baptisms, marriages, graduations, inaugurations/coronations, and funerals) the ritual represents the threshold between the participants’ previous social roles and standing and the one she or he is about to take on. It also aids the participants’ community in recognizing and adjusting to this important change. When people embark on pilgrimages or agree to special vows or take on temporary roles (such as becoming an LDS missionary, entering military service, or going on spiritual retreat), ritual helps them recognize this as a threshold time when they are narrowing their typical range of choices in order to serve a particular good. This period generally carries clear outward signifiers (such as changes in dress, or hair, or personal associations), alerting the community that this person has been set apart for a special purpose.

A community will enter a similar threshold-type space and time when they gather for special purposes such as performing ancestor rites, engaging in spirit communion, or petitioning for healing, expelling an evil influence, or hoping for success in a particular endeavor. By engaging in ritual activities, participants try to thin the threshold between heaven and earth, between the flesh and the spirit, between the sacred and the profane. They hope to open an *axis mundi* (world pole/pillar): a centering place in the cosmos that facilitates communion between realms, or, more personally, a frame of mind allowing the participants to become conduits through which earth and heaven can more easily traffic.

Other features of the ritualized establishment of thresholds also aid in a kind of de-cluttering effect: erasing the statuses and idiosyncrasies that would otherwise separate members of the group from one another, helping the group to unite around their highest priorities. Think, for example, of activities surrounding a sporting event or political convention. No one cares whether fellow fans or delegates are bus drivers, accountants, or executive vice-presidents. In this liminal space, they are all united in purpose. It's also okay—even encouraged—for one to sing, chant, cheer, and behave in ways that one normally wouldn't in day-to-day life.

Along with the dress and grooming peculiar to the occasion, ritual also often introduces new vocal patterns and language. Mantras, chants, slang, shorthand, changes in the cadence, vocal tone and volume of speech, the use of new pronouns for speaking to ancestors, angels, or deities, and various other communication patterns become dominant. Perhaps, as in the case when liminality features deliberate silence, writing and other ways of signifying will take on new forms and prominence. Rote repetition will also at times become a prevailing form of teaching as community/ritual leaders seek to have key ideas (a group's *gnosis*) begin to seek deep into the participants' consciousness. Participants sometimes will also take on new names or identities, or they may use leveling terms and pronouns such as "brother," "sister," "friend," "beloved," "thee," "thou," and other terms of intimacy.

Indeed, in ritual spaces, many previous rules are suspended, while new ones arise. Everyone from kings to paupers may

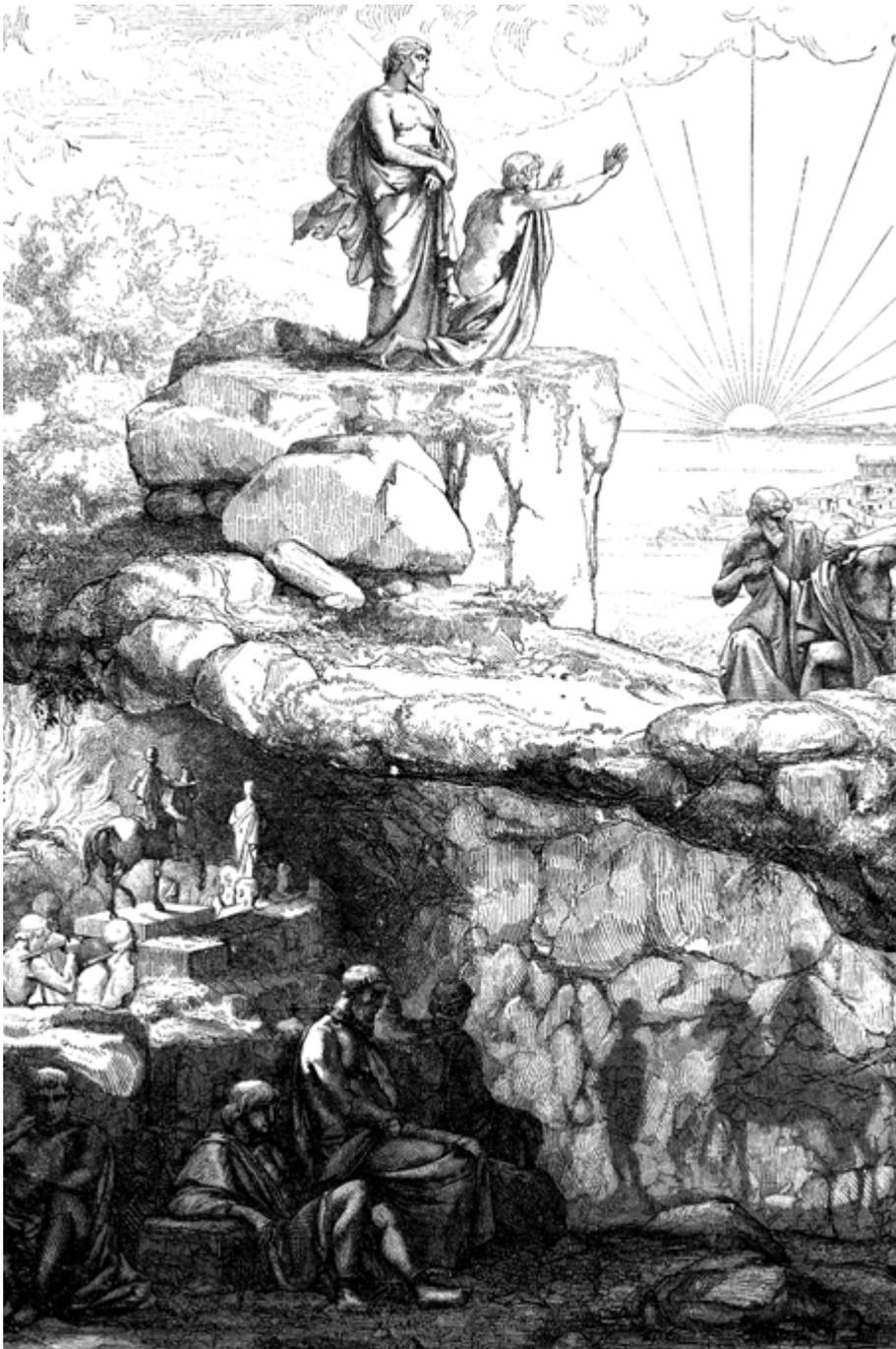
suddenly find themselves on the same social level, or even find their roles reversed with the least becoming the greatest and the powerful being forced to submit to their inferiors' critiques and demands. Ritual theorist Victor Turner has called the times when these dynamics are at play "anti-structure." In anti-structural spaces, social pressures can be released, grievances aired, and everyone can be reminded of the consequences of their actions and how precarious power can be. Turner presents Halloween as this kind of ritual space and time, in which children gain the upper hand for an evening, where darkness is given preference over light, where we might embody the images of the things that frighten us most. Halloween used to be much more charged than it is now. Children really *were* given permission to play a trick on you if you didn't give them a treat. The costumes were rarely cute and fuzzy; they represented everything from witches to ghosts, monsters and demons to criminals to insane asylum escapees, to hobos and other marginal or frightening persons and beings, with no attempts to soften the edges.²

Sometimes a ritual will put its participants through a physical or mental ordeal, making them work together through pain, deprivation, or fatigue. This shared experience creates what Turner labeled "communitas"—a feeling of bondedness that often emerges among the participants. With their individuality ruptured, they have been stripped down to their common humanity, with every pretense exposed and discarded. They are now brothers, sisters, teammates, platoon members, children of God, fellow-servants. This ability to birth people into new identities and create more

coherent groups leads many people to refer to ritual liminality as a womb that is nurturing new life, as a time that is "betwixt and between" realms, roles, and cares.³

However, liminality must eventually end; its participants must return to their lives and their day-to-day structures. Because it is so intense and intentionally ambiguous, liminality cannot become the norm. If groups try to continue it indefinitely, ultimately they develop new kinds of social structures that allow it a better chance to thrive, but, alas, it will indeed still be a new form of structure. Convents and monasteries, ashrams and other intentional communities, punctuate their daily routines with a larger number of forays into liminal spaces, but even they are dominated by quotidian activities and cares.

PHASE THREE: ACTS OF INTEGRATION. As liminal, *kairos* immersions come to an end, ritual participants begin to integrate once more into *chronos*. They emerge from their prayer or meditative language and postures, change back into their normal clothes, return home, and begin thinking in and using terms appropriate to usual social structures. If the ritual were a rite of passage, the person will re-integrate into the collective with their new status: the child as an adult, engaged partners as a married couple, a older woman or man as an elder, the deceased as a spirit or ancestor, her or his spouse as a widow or widower. Within Mormonism, we can add to this list "setting apart" ordinances in which the person emerges as Relief Society president, bishop, missionary, patriarch, etc. Aided by the rituals, the group prepares to incorporate these persons in different roles, and both the group and



“Plato’s Cave.”

individuals now take on new obligations with regard to each other.

But the highest goal of ritual is to send its participants back into *chronos* with refreshed energy, insight, and understandings

of themselves and other community members. Ideally the participants will feel as if they are on a “higher” plane than they were when they entered. Yet, as we all recognize, eventually this energy dissipates, people

and communities normalize—which is why so many cultures schedule recurring rituals, helping individuals and groups re-immense in *kairos*, re-engage with the liminal, and once more receive rituals’ empowering gifts.

UNITY AMONG RITUAL DIVERSITY

GIVEN THE WIDE variety of types of rituals, ranging from quiet meditation to ecstatic, sometimes chemically induced altered stages, is there another way, besides in the common structures of ritual described above, that rituals might also be seen as united—as attempting to do the same basic thing? I believe so, and here is where my claim that ritual has its own kind of “sense” comes to the front again. Whether a ritual is quiet, meditative, seeking to quiet the mind rather than excite it and the senses, or if it is the opposite—wild, chaotic, deliberately mimicking ancestors, gods, demons, temptors, and is full of symbolism and thick, evocative language—all of these different methodologies are seeking breakthrough. The meditative ones act in ways that clear space for universal energies—too easily not appreciated as being present or only dwelling in the back of our awareness—to be experienced. The other types seek breakthrough by going “through” the symbols, stories, and roles, to unite with these as fully as possible—to the point that they exhaust their abilities as *signifiers* of the god or energies or sources of light and increase the participant’s efforts to actually unite with them, to dwell in the burnings. Via either path, the ultimate goal is quite similar.

One way to envision how these two

approaches work toward the same end is to put a spin on what is popularly called “Plato’s cave.” In his *Republic*, Plato presents our path of coming to recognize true Reality (what he calls the Forms) as analogous to what seems, at first, to be an absurd situation. In his allegory, a group of prisoners have lived their entire lives sitting shackled with their backs against a wall within a cave, with everything that they consider to be “real” actually consisting of shadows projected onto the wall of cave in front of them. The shadows and their interactions are created by persons walking, talking, and holding up shapes and acting out scenes as they pass along a walkway in front of a fire. Plato then describes one of the prisoners breaking free from his chains and beginning to gain greater and greater awareness of the situation he or she had been in. She learns what has been causing the shadows she had been seeing as the “real” things of life. He begins to understand fire and its light-giving properties, and then eventually ascends step-by-step up through the cave’s entrance and into the light and a direct experience of the Forms (represented by the sun). Plato recognizes this as a difficult journey, with each step causing a need for eyes and mind to re-adjust in order contemplate the more and more solid realities. But with patience and discipline, it is a journey that is very possible and worthwhile. It is also a *via negativa*—a path “away from” shadow, story, any experience influenced in strong ways by the senses.

Plato doesn’t speak of it, nor to my knowledge even imagine it, but there is another way out of a cave: *through* its walls. The journey through the wall in front of them will, of course, take the escaping

prisoners through the shadows themselves. Through uniting as much as possible with the stories being told, they will eventually recognize them as stories and therefore realize how much “more” underlies the shadow symbols and narratives they had thought were reality. In other words, while role-playing, dancing, drumming, ingesting hallucinogens, or mimicking primordial figures and powers, the participants at some point break free of the symbols they are embodying and experience more of the reality they signify.

In short, there are (at least) two ways to escape a sensory-overloaded and mind-chattered, less-full reality: backward from it or forward through it, fleeing from or pushing against it until it reveals its limits and we are given the chance to contemplate larger realities more directly.

RITUAL AND MYTH

IN ADDITION TO structural unities, many rituals also often unify in another way: through their interplay with the participants’ community’s mythic stories. Whether or not a group’s foundational stories are based on historical persons or events, they contribute greatly to its shared (or at least honored) worldview. Myths play in archetypes and archetypal realms that engage core elements of the human psyche, making them good to “think within.” Myths assist in creating a sense of group cohesion: these are the stories of “our” people; here is how “we” came to be in “this” land and at “this” time; these are “our” tasks, “our” purposes for being. Furthermore, as is the case of cosmogonic myths—groups’ stories about the birth of *cosmos* (“order”)

created out of nothing or emerging from *chaos* (“disorder”)—they can also take us into deep, existential territory: what does this world, or, for that matter, *anything* really mean? Of these stories of the birth of cosmos, Lawrence Sullivan writes:

Fundamental conditions are conceived in terms of the beginning, the first order, the primordium. The basic structures of appearance, hiddenness, inchoateness, differentiation, uniqueness, multiplicity, language, gesture, stasis, and change provide footholds for the imagination. By their very presence in the imagination and in the beginning, these principle realities, envisioned in particular symbols, condition all subsequent forms of contingent being itself. The universe has an integrity of its own because its presence first takes shape in the images of the beginning. The creative primordium is an ordered progression of powerful events that effect the most significant change ever wrought: the appearance of the world. By depicting the greatest contrasts in modes of being, creation reveals what change means. . . . Creation accounts provide the basis for imagination, thought, and reflection—that is, for the ordering processes that make the cosmos a home to humankind.⁴

It “makes sense” then, that when groups or individuals enter into ritual spaces—the very purpose of which is to bypass or overpower quotidian preoccupations—that they would often structure activities around stories that are, by their very nature, overarching, that sing of the

interplay of great powers accomplishing great things (acknowledging, of course, that “great” can also mean “terrible,” for not all change is for the better), and that serve to provide people with their basic sense or orientation within the ordered world (and instructions for how to stave off the ever-encroaching threat of chaos, a return to disorder). Cosmogonies help us humans feel centered in the largest contexts possible, and they often (or else other myths take over and do this job) also help explain the social order and our roles and purposes within it. They convey our highest ideals and warn of the greatest dangers (ideas, tricksters, devils, false prophets).

This is certainly a large part of what is going on in the LDS temple endowment, and it can help explain what I shared earlier about my own experiences with the temple of feeling empowered and better prepared to meet the world following my participation in its rituals. Bracketing but not ruling out entirely the claim many Latter-day Saints make that it is the “Spirit’s” presence in the temple that leads to our having the feelings we do following our participation, the endowment’s reliance upon Mormonism’s cosmogonic myth alone goes a long way to explaining our greater sense of orientation within the world. Add to that its use of embodied actions, role-playing, and the making of archetypal choices and covenants, and we have a fantastic recipe for our experiences as Latter-day Saints of cosmos in comparison with the chaos of our daily lives with all its ambiguities and unclear meanings. As Paul Tillich writes, one of the key types of empowerment is the existential “courage to be.”⁵ Rituals such as the en-

dowment help us feel oriented, encouraged, significant, purposeful—leading us to feel more prepared psychologically for what life brings to us. As a means to accomplishing a key function of ritual, this “makes sense” to me.

LEANING INTO RITUAL

WE ARE RATIONAL beings. I am a rational being who loves all that my mind can do. However, after many years of “deconstructing” my ritual experiences, I have learned to once more “lean into” ritual and simply abandon myself, as much as I can, into its mystery. As I have shared above, I have satisfied myself that there is method to its madness, that ritual makes its own kind of “sense.” As a result, I find myself once more able to happily venture into anti-structure and to embrace *kairos* and all the possibilities and potential energies at play there. I have discovered that it isn’t dishonoring to my gifts for thinking and analyzing and careful weighing to also recognize their limits and the habits of mind and types of experience they forefront. Sometimes we need a different experience, a cleanse.

Early in Alfred North Whitehead’s masterwork *Process and Reality*, he writes, “the true method of discovery is like the flight of an aeroplane. It starts from the ground of particular observation; it makes a flight in the thin air of imaginative generalization; and it again lands for renewed observation rendered acute by rational interpretation.”⁶ For me, entering the liminality of ritual has begun to feel much like ascending into the “thin air of imaginative generalization” so that when I land

back in my normal life, I can remember how it looked from this different (perhaps higher) perspective, rendering my vision more “acute” and helping me to engage the world through my senses and rational mind more clearly. It is not a betrayal of my mind to leave it aside from time to time to let ritual do its empowering work “to” and “in” me. 🌿

NOTES

1. Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, Monica B. Vizedon and Gabrielle L. Coffee, trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).
2. Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969), 172–174.
3. *Ibid.*, 95.
4. Lawrence E. Sullivan, *Icanchu’s Drum: An Orientation to Meaning in South American Religions* (New York: Macmillan, 1989), 25.
5. Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952).
6. Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, corrected edition, eds. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: The Free Press, 1978), 25.

CORRECTIONS

Due to an editorial oversight, some citations were not made in two articles from issue 181: “Does ‘Mormon’ Still Equal Polygamy?” and “An Overview of Mormon Fundamentalist Groups.”

“Does ‘Mormon’ Still Equal Polygamy?” quoted but did not cite Robert A. Trennert Jr, “The Mormons and the Office of Indian Affairs: The Conflict Over Winter Quarters, 1846-1848,” *Nebraska History* 53 (1972): 381–400, as well as an excerpt from the Wikipedia page entitled “Mormon (Word).”

Being a survey article, “An Overview of Mormon Fundamentalist Groups” relied on information that can be found on Wikipedia. A note to that effect should have been included. Four direct quotes from Wikipedia should also have been cited.

SUNSTONE regrets these oversights.