

Mormon author Carol Lynn Pearson tries to separate church and hate

Steven Winn, Chronicle Arts and Culture Critic
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It's the question Carol Lynn Pearson hears just about every time she appears in public. She heard it again last weekend, during an audience discussion that followed a packed-house performance of her play "Facing East" at Theatre Rhinoceros.

How, one woman asked, could Pearson justify her own membership and involvement in the Mormon church?

The question was prompted by several things. One was the action of "Facing East," which takes place at the funeral of a young gay Mormon man who committed suicide under the shadow of church and family stigma. The other was the story of Pearson's own life, detailed in her 1986 book, "Goodbye, I Love You," and retold in brief, as it was to the Theatre Rhinoceros crowd, many times since. The mother of four young children at the time, Pearson divorced her gay Mormon husband in 1978. He died of AIDS in 1984.

Pearson, a slim, forthright woman of 67 who wears her silvery white hair jauntily short, nodded along as the question was posed. "I love the Mormon community," she responded, "and I have a unique opportunity to build bridges." A number of her church ward leaders, Pearson noted, had attended the opening of "Facing East" the night before. "They've been nothing but supportive," she said. "I believe the Mormon heart is a good heart. I feel comfortable with my role in the Mormon church."

Whether the church and wider Mormon population feel entirely comfortable with her, as an advocate for gay rights and recognition, is another matter. Doctrinally opposed to a "homosexual lifestyle" that is "not normal," as the high-ranking Mormon elder Dallin H. Oaks has put it, the church addresses a reality it would probably just as soon avoid altogether in a carefully constructed way.

A new Mormon church pamphlet on the subject that was issued last month puts the official Mormon position on homosexuality like this: "If you avoid immoral thoughts and actions, you have not transgressed even if you feel such an attraction." The document goes on to advise, "The desire for physical gratification does not authorize immorality for anyone." True happiness, according to the pamphlet, "depends on more than physical urges. These urges diminish as more fundamental emotional needs are met - such as the



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need to interact with and serve others."

Pearson, as the Theatre Rhinoceros audience affirmed in a post-play session that soon became more like a tear-filled, pan-denominational testimony meeting, has undeniably served others. One man, a fundamentalist preacher who left his wife and three children 15 years ago when he embraced his own homosexuality, told Pearson she had spoken to him on the phone for an hour at the time and dissuaded him from suicide. "You saved my life," he said. Pearson stepped offstage to hug him.

A gay Mormon whose parents refuse to speak his partner's name said "Facing East," which focuses on the grief-torn mother and father, had helped him see his own parents' perspective. "I've been semi-selfish in my own journey," he said. A woman in the second row stood up to express, between heavy sobs, her gratitude for the play and its author.

Pearson took it all in graciously, with neither self-importance nor false modesty. As a prominent Mormon author of some 40 books and plays, she's been in plenty of crowds like this one over the years. Her sense of purpose is apparent when she ticks off facts about suicide rates in Mormon-dominated Utah - the highest in the country for males ages 15-24. She assesses her own work with straightforward clarity. "I'm not an artist's artist," she says. "Issues are more important to me than art itself."

Pearson's equipoise didn't come easily. In a recent conversation at her ranch house on a sunny cul-de-sac in Walnut Creek, the Utah native and longtime California transplant spun out the improbable narrative of her own life. Born a fourth-generation Mormon in Salt Lake City in 1939, Pearson was a happy and optimistic child, she began. Her family spent some time on a Ute Indian reservation, without electricity or running water, before moving to Provo.

By the time she graduated from Brigham Young High School and went on to Brigham Young University, she was immersed in theater and writing. She met Gerald, her husband to be, when they were both cast in a BYU production of Thornton Wilder's "The Skin of Our Teeth." It was during their engagement that Gerald first told her of his attraction to men.

"This was 1966," Pearson said with a measured sigh. "We were so naive and so Utah. We accepted the promise that you just repent when you get off track and everything will work out."

After an engagement that was broken and resumed, the couple married in Salt Lake's Mormon Temple on Sept. 9, 1966. Their first child was born two years later. By then, Pearson was something of a local celebrity. Her first book of inspirational poems, self-published with Gerald's prodding and a \$2,000 loan, sold an impressive 25,000 copies. "Nobody but some outrageously gay man would decide to publish his wife's poems," Pearson said with a laugh. She has supported herself and for many years her entire family as a writer ever since.

Pearson recalled her marriage as one of mutual devotion and fun - "in many ways a cut above the

marriages of my friends." But, she added, "what Gerald had hoped would happen didn't." He still wanted to have sex with men. Apprehensive about her marriage ending at the heart of the Mormon world, Pearson proposed that the couple relocate from Utah to California. After they did, Gerald moved to San Francisco while Carol Lynn and the children remained in Walnut Creek.

Pearson maintains a complicated double-view about this fissure in her life. "It was hell," she said, "the resentment, the anger, the confusion, the divorce. But we also remained close. He was a wonderful father." A small smile came and went, ghost-like, across Pearson's face. " 'If I could just find a man like you,' " he often said, " 'I'd be in seventh heaven.' With my interest in women's issues and Gerald's being gay," she said, "it's occurred to me that gender is what brought us together in the first place - possibly, maybe."

After Gerald's AIDS diagnosis, and just a month before his death, Carol Lynn was facing a house payment she couldn't make. An 11th-hour sale of a Christmas story to a Mormon publisher saved the day and proved to be a major financial gusher in the years to come.

Her ex-husband came back to Walnut Creek to die, Pearson said. It happened in the very room where she and her visitor were sitting. Composed in her recounting until this point, Pearson teared up as she began to describe how the members of her Mormon community rose to the occasion. Every night one of her church "visiting teachers" told her to make a list of what she needed the next day.

"It was always done, whatever it was - food, transportation, yard work," said Pearson. "There was no shunning of me or Gerald, not ever, not once. Mormonism can not be easily dismissed in any direction." In Pearson's own cosmology, "we're all in the correct classroom, working out the story problems that we should be doing. And the answer to all of them is: 'How much do you love?' "

With the publication of her marriage memoir, "Goodbye, I Love You," Pearson became a spokeswoman and inspirational leader on homosexuality in the Mormon world. A subsequent book, "No More Goodbyes," tells a range of stories about gay Mormondom. One deals with Bruce Bastian, a married gay Mormon who was also the wealthy co-founder of WordPerfect. Bastian became a confidant and close friend and later a financial angel for "Facing East." The show opened at Salt Lake City's Plan-B Theatre before traveling to New York and San Francisco. Singapore in the next scheduled port of call.

Pearson has never remarried. "That has been a disappointment in my life," she said. There's also been grief along with joy, bafflement and a strange sense of wonder in the lives of her children. One son is an unmarried animator; the other is a rock musician and the divorced father of two. Her youngest child, Katy, died of a brain tumor seven years ago.

As for her oldest, Pearson drew a deep breath before relating this chapter. Like her mother, Emily married a gay man and subsequently divorced him. That man is Steven Fales, creator of the widely traveled solo show "Confessions of a Mormon Boy." Fales performed it locally, at the New Conservatory Theatre Center, in 2002. Emily, hewing to her mother's past, is now writing a book about her life with a gay Mormon

husband.

Pearson offered a wry half-smile. "There are days," she said, "when I think that either everything is a very bad joke or everything has a hidden sense to it. I do melt down and rail at the heavens. But I don't stay there long. I always have to come into a place where there is sunlight."

Facing East:

Plays through Aug. 26 at Theatre Rhinoceros, 2926 16th St., San Francisco. Tickets \$20. Call (415) 861-5079 or visit www.therhino.org. Playwright Carol Lynn Pearson

will appear in a post-show discussion with the audience following tonight's performance. Learn more about Pearson's work and connect with her at www.clpearson.com.

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<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2007/08/18/DDNBRJU91.DTL>

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