

*THE RETURN OF ELDER PINGREE – Memoir of a Departed Mormon*

Director's Statement – by Geoff Pingree

This film took me nearly fifteen years to make, easily three times as long as any of my other projects. Progress was slow because of my discomfort in telling a story that, on the face of it, might seem self-absorbed (an autobiographical documentary composed from my experiences, my journal, my voiceovers) or unnecessary (do we really need to hear from another white, cis-gender, upper middle-class, educated, straight male?), and from my uneasiness in laying bare some of my deepest spiritual, psychological, moral, and familial vulnerabilities.

Unlike my experience in making other documentaries, production for this film was improvisational and ongoing. Because I had not kept in contact with the people I knew in Guatemala, I was not able to organize visits, schedule interviews, or make plans in advance; I literally had no idea what I'd find after twenty-five years.

So why did I return there, and why is the film documenting that return something I am now ready to release?

I've often asked myself, "Did you get what you want from making this film?" It turns out that I've come to want what I got. The film is about searches that are never fulfilled, yearnings that cannot be sustained, and certainties plagued and then nourished by doubt. It is less about seeking to find answers and more about the process of seeking.

I see now that my primary search was for my own worthiness.

Mormonism's claim to unique religious truth and authority draws a bright line separating insiders from outsiders; in the Mormon community, whether one is deemed active and faithful or is judged to have "fallen away" is of great consequence. Growing up, I felt the pressure of this harsh distinction. My shifting beliefs in and commitments to Mormonism transformed me from insider to outsider, making me an exile from my religious and cultural traditions, but also from my family, the people I love the most.

In the film I explore how crossing over that bright line shaped my life, but rather than probe the question directly with my family, I asked it of the people in a foreign land who'd known me at my most devout, when I was most dedicated to the spiritual tradition and religious institution of the church.

Though specific to my family and religion, my experience is also a universal coming-of-age struggle for self-knowledge and self-acceptance. None of us is ever exactly what others want us to be; our lives are continual negotiations of our differences. In the end, only we can answer for ourselves what we are worth.

This film, then, is not only about or for Mormons, nor is it just my story. It is but one expression of a broader human inquiry into how to do good in the world, how to make sense of and take responsibility for our impact on others. It is about what happens to human relationships as time passes and people's hearts and minds change. And it is about reaffirming dignity, love, and respect – both because and in spite of shared experiences now left behind.