

★ **The Precarious Walk: Essays from Sand & Sky****Phyllis Barber**

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Phyllis Barber is, more than anything else, an explorer. In *The Precarious Walk*, she explores the physical and mental landscapes that make up her world. Her settings include places as diverse as the Mojave Desert, Ecuador, and Slovenia. Her topics encompass family, marriage, motherhood, and loss. Woven throughout the book is Barber's search for meaning.

Barber studied piano performance as a young woman, and music has always been important to her. Perhaps that's how she became such a good listener. She hears music in the sounds of the desert, where she lived much of her life, and in the cadence of people's speech. Her writing is as shifting and lyrical as a sonata.

Barber was raised and spent much of her adult life as a practicing Mormon. Here, she also examines the difficulty of letting go of the religion in which she'd been raised. Freedom, she says, "is a lonely place sometimes." In other essays, she muses upon responsibility, silence, and the self.

While Barber is a deep thinker, she presents her thoughts in lucid and accessible prose. She poses questions more often than offering answers. The essays read like stories in their concrete grounding in place and time. Details, dialogue, and a diverse cast of characters populate them. Her writing is a mixture of plot and poetry. "I am a creature made of lizard skins, sagebrush, horsetail grass, and rain-washed sand," she says, vibrant in her conveyance of the heat of the desert, the hurt of divorce, the devastation of loss, and the balm of hope.

In Mormonism, to witness is to interact with the divine. Barber's book is a witness to the divine that is in nature and in the soul, in the whispering of the wind and the inner voice. To journey with her is to discover what's timeless.

KAREN MULVAHILL (May / June 2022)

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