

CONFORMONISM

OR

Mormonschism?

Ten parables in search of the answer

by

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Preface: Who are ewe?

“Surely not I, Lord!” – Matthew 26:22

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With a newly crowned consort Queen at his side, King David swept his scandalous misdeeds under the carpet and went right back to his kingly business; that is, until one day when the prophet Nathan dropped in for a visit. Nathan told David a parable about a little ewe lamb that was stolen from its poor and destitute owner by a very wealthy man, who then proceeded to slaughter the lamb without a second thought. The story was essentially framed in the form of a question to David:

“What would you do?”

Having spent his childhood putting his own life on the line to protect his flock – perfecting his giant-slaying skills in the process – this fabled story certainly struck a chord with the incensed king. David demanded not just retribution and restitution; for this particular crime he decreed an instant death sentence on the perpetrator. Nathan’s response to this jump to judgment forms one of the great teaching moments of the Bible:

“You are that man!”

So why did Nathan bother speaking in parables? Why not just come right out and say what he meant directly? He could very well have just stated the real facts: “David, you’ve been very, very bad!” But I don’t think the genuine reflection that followed would have been possible without David having first condemned one of his wicked (albeit fictional) subjects.

The problem, of course, is that conclusions that are clearly obvious to an outside observer are much trickier for the insider to discern; when you’re caught up in the thick of it, sometimes you have to remove yourself from your own story in order to answer the toughest of questions.

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Imagine you are sitting in an audience, comfortably watching a story unfold on stage. “What a fool!” you say about the main character; then suddenly you look around and find yourself having been magically transported into the lead role up on that very same stage. You begin to recognize the props, the set, and the familiar actors all around you. The mind-blowing realization that you’ve been the fool all along – while the real jester becomes the wise man in Shakespearean fashion – can come as quite a shock; I think that sense of recognition is the exact design of many biblical parables, provided there is an accompanying change of heart.

The same sort of allegorical questions that arise in the Bible's parables can obviously be found in secular stories as well, whether it's in Aesop's Fables ("Did I really drop my perfectly good bone in the river to chase an illusion?"), Orwell's tales ("Am I more like the sheep or the pigs on the farm?") or Geisel's rhymes ("Is the Lorax really pointing his finger at ME?")

In trying to figure out which Seussian Sneetch I've been all my life – and what sort of Sneetch I'd like to become during the time I have left – I have felt the need to take a step back from my own story and embark on a quest to sort out some conflicting thoughts and predicaments that have riddled my soul for forty-odd years. In choosing to travel down this road, however, I do recognize that the acknowledgment of complicit guilt can be quite painful:

"Surely not I, Lord!" cried each of Christ's final dinner guests when their loyalty was questioned; the insinuation alone caused the disciples to feel "exceedingly sorrowful", "deeply grieved", or "greatly distressed." Whichever translation you prefer, wallow-world is not a fun place to visit – much less to live in! If you can, on the other hand, get straight to the heart of it and dig your way out of the mire, perhaps your time and effort could be put toward more productive purposes.

So in that spirit, I've taken ten of the random concoctions that have been floating around in my head, and I've written them out as open-ended, allegorical challenges that force me to take an outsider's look at a series of successive forks stuck in my road. In trying to decide which direction to take at every turn, each of the allegories poses a single question to the Muppet in the mirror:

"Is it I, Lord?"

In short, ten times in a row I have answered Nathan's question with the humbling, resounding realization that – if sincere – ought to trigger a turnaround:

"I am that man!"

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These stories were written to reflect the eye-opening perspective that I am trying to add to my "Weltanschauung" – the world as I have now come to see it – and even though they address the parts of my identity that have been intertwined with Mormonism, my hope is that others outside of the Mormon movement might find some meaning in them as well. One of my cues for embarking on these analogous journeys came after watching Leah Remini's Scientology exposé, when I retrospectively recognized that every smug shake of my head should actually ring an introspective wake-up bell. With that in mind, perhaps these parables will take on parallel symbolism for those raised in similarly exclusive environments. In the end, I'm just trying to answer the classic question from the Combat Rock album: "Should I stay or should I go?"

I do realize that this rambling write-up may lead my family and friends to question my sanity or fear for my soul; whatever the case, I'd prefer to start a dialogue rather than deliver a one-way sermon that thoughtlessly dismisses others with whom I've shared a connection on this amazing journey. So in the end, I'd like to turn each question around in the hope of getting your genuine response to the question:

"What would you do? What would you do...if we wore the same shoe?"

[Disclaimer: Although I'm still trying to find the balance between individuality and community, this is my journey and mine alone. These viewpoints do not reflect those of any organization or of any other individuals, including my own family members. I do not and cannot speak for anyone else.]

## Introduction: Blissful Ignorance

*"All you need is love?"*

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Just a quick question before we get started: What do you see here?



If you see the word “love” – as might be expected – what sorts of feelings or memories does that term stir up in your mind? How sure are you that those memories are real? How convinced are you that those particular letters even spell out “love”? Are you absolutely positive? Would you say that you “know” that it says love? Using just the twenty-six ABCs of the Roman/Latin alphabet, could those letters possibly say anything else other than love?

Well what if I told you that when I look at that little snippet, I see a mischievous boy named Max. What if I told you that this set of letters has nothing at all to do with love and merely represents Max’s name? Is there any reasonable way I could be reading that right? Or can you imagine a plausible way that we could both somehow be right?

I wholeheartedly believe that it says “Max”; at this point, in fact, I would go so far as to say I “know” that it says Max. In my eyes and in my mind, it is a provable fact, and I don’t believe there is anything that could convince me otherwise. Perhaps you feel the same way about your belief that it says “love”. Well, I’m going to ask you to be open-minded enough to consider my interpretation; and if I ask that of you, I have to expect the same of myself. In other words, I’ll likewise try to be open-minded enough to accept the possibility that I have somehow missed the mark about Max.

Genuinely accepting the validity of an alternative view is a very hard thing to do in the face of absolute conviction. If you aren’t convinced of my interpretation, I believe I have additional information that might change your mind – if you are willing to consider it. Once I pass that along, perhaps you can shed additional light on my interpretation as well; I promise to re-consider my conviction in light of your insights, and maybe then we can try to reach a mutual understanding of the truth. I have been wrong before about things I thought I knew, so I have to accept that I might be wrong about this one as well.

In the meantime, to you it says love, to me it says Max, and until new light is cast on the subject, we will find ourselves at an impasse. If you refuse to examine any additional information in this regard, and if I refuse to consider your perspective, we will never see eye to eye. I will be stuck with my viewpoint and you will be stuck with yours. Too many families, nations, cultures and institutions have been divided and destroyed by that stubbornness – let’s not do that!

Now that I’ve called the meaning of the word into question and have expressed my conviction of a differing interpretation, maybe you’re no longer 100% sure that it says love. But what if I hadn’t expressed my own view? What if the only source of your own information came from those who believed it said love? Now I could be wrong, but in the case of the image above, I really don’t think any unsolicited doubts would have spontaneously appeared on their own.

Taking it further, what if – on top of having only a single source of information about the meaning of the snippet in question – you had been told that the mere consideration of other viewpoints came with hidden dangers that could destroy your soul? In that case you might actually

fear the exploration of the slightest doubt and find comfort in the meaning that you've accepted, shunning further investigation and perhaps professing, "I know it says love" until the day you die without ever having considered an alternative perspective.

I can certainly understand why someone would think – or even claim to *know* – that it says love, so by no means does my own alternative view invalidate the sincerity of anyone making that claim. Everyone has the right to their own belief and interpretation, and I respect that view as genuine; but here's the problem:

A lack of doubt is not knowledge; sometimes it's just plain ignorance.

And if you'll allow the paraphrase:

Ignorance never was happiness.

Those remarks might sound awfully pretentious, as if I've somehow deluded myself into a denial of my own ignorance, but in this case I'm not using the term *ignorance* as in stupidity, but rather as the "nounification" of the action verb – or should I say the *in*-action verb – *to ignore*. Maybe I should be calling it *ignorement* instead, because it merely implies that some piece of the story – whether deliberately or accidentally – has been *ignored*. And if that which has previously been ignored is genuinely considered, I for one, believe that what once was knowledge can turn out to be surprisingly malleable.

So where do we start? Could I change my opinion simply because the people I love most in this world professed their profound knowledge that this set of glyphs spells out love, pulling every card from the unanimous fibres of their being to absent shadows of doubt in trying to convince me? What if they desperately needed me to believe that it says love and cried tears at night for anyone with a differing belief?

What if those closest to me pasted reprints of this snippet all around their houses and sang only songs that contained the word love – *Love is all you need*, *Love is the seventh wave*, and so on. What if they recited *love* lyrics over and over again every day at dusk and dawn? What if they told me that all of the overwhelming feelings that are stirred up inside of me at the thought of the term "love" prove conclusively that those letters do, in fact, spell love?

What if they believed that my soul could only be saved if I could make myself believe that it says love...and that I would suffer endless torment unless I could pass a lie detector test to prove my genuine belief in that viewpoint? What if someone tortured me on a rack and begged me to profess that belief?

Well maybe I'd give in and say it...but could I really pass that test and whole-heartedly convince myself of an alternative truth? At least in my case, I don't think any amount of pressure could bring about a real change in conviction – unless, that is, my eyes could be opened to another possibility by the provision of additional information.

One thing we all need to accept about human nature, though, is that even if someone receives evidence that runs counter to their original belief, there are no guarantees of an accompanying change in mindset or stance on a given issue; some beliefs are fervently held without consideration of any information at all, because divine confirmation or successful indoctrination has already trumped any existing or future evidence that might be considered to be contradictory. To those who are convinced of the correctness of their own views "because God said so," the existence of contrary information becomes entirely irrelevant to the discussion.

If you believe that God told you that the word in the image above says love, for example, no information I present is going to matter in the least; I'm not going to change God's mind, after all! If an equivalent manner of conviction would be a prerequisite for swaying your mind, and if you don't accept the slightest possibility that your eyes could be opened to another interpretation, then there's really no point in reading or discussing any further; I'd invite you to stop right here as we part ways at this impassable impasse.

As for those who wish to continue for now under the assumed absence of supernatural endorsement of this particular image's meaning, perhaps we have the possibility of genuine openness to another angle. If you're the least bit curious about another viewpoint and choose to read on, we might just end up agreeing about Max by the time we're done – or perhaps not; in any case, I hope we can share an interesting journey sorting it out! In the end, it is of course your choice...and here's mine:



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## Chapter 1: A Tale of Two Historicities

### **My Analogy: Shadmax, Moritz, and Bamboozelo**

*“There once was a shaman from Kenya...”*



This story is about Yūsuf, a late shaman from Kenya. Yūsuf was born in 1890 in Kiambu, a small, destitute village without much contact with the outside world.

When Yūsuf was a young boy, people in his tribe noticed something very special about him; he had incredibly elaborate dreams, and each morning when he woke up, his friends and family would gather around to hear him recite his dreams with a level of detail that convinced many that he had the supernatural abilities of a shaman.

The villagers had a tradition of fashioning trinkets to embody the animal spirits that they worshipped. These animal spirits would often appear in Yūsuf’s dreams, and the interpretations that he shared with the villagers helped them feel more connected to the deities in their world of spirits.

The village of Kiambu was very poor, which didn’t sit well with Yūsuf. When he was a teenager, he tried to break the cycle of poverty by using his skills to earn some money among the neighboring tribes. During his travels, he would ask people to tell him their own dreams, and then – for a small fee – he would make predictions based on those dreams. He rarely got it right, though, so eventually he returned to Kiambu without having earned much at all.

One thing he did gain during his travels, however, was a measure of insight into other religions; during one of his trips, for example, he had visited a Jewish settlement and was enamored by the stories of their ancient prophets and heroes.

These characters began to appear in Yūsuf’s dreams after he returned home, eventually replacing the animal spirits altogether. In one particularly vivid dream, he heard a voice saying that inanimate trinkets should not be worshipped at all. From then on, he started telling his fellow villagers that they should focus their worship around the Jewish prophets rather than trinkets and animal spirits.

At one point he fell deathly ill, and when he recovered, Yūsuf told his tribe that he had visited the world of spirits himself. This rite of passage secured his role as a shaman, and his whole village began to cling to every word of his dreams. Yūsuf wanted to devote himself full-time to spiritual matters, so he asked the villagers to bring offerings along when they visited his home. They were very supportive, and many brought food and valuables. Of most importance to Yūsuf, though, were the tribe members who offered their services as scribes to record his dreams. The dreams grew increasingly complex and began to include not just the Jewish accounts of the prophets’ teachings, but further details describing their daily lives as well.

Yūsuf was particularly fascinated with Ezekiel, Daniel, and other heroes of the Torah who had preached in a foreign land under Babylonian captivity. He had only heard very brief tales of their experiences during his own travels, but he wanted his fellow villagers to know more about their lives. With Daniel, for instance, Yūsuf began to relate not just the well-known accounts of the lion’s den, but also a number of stories about his childhood, his marriage, and his family life with his



children. The villagers couldn't wait to hear each new dream and learn about a new facet of each prophet's life.

While most of his tribe believed that the events in Yūsuf's dreams actually occurred, there were a few sceptics who had done some traveling themselves and had learned of a recent consensus among biblical scholars that some of the prophets – including Daniel – were fictional, conglomerate characters and that many of the previously accepted stories were now understood to be apocryphal. They began to promote the idea among the villagers that the lengthy stories about the day-to-day lives of the ancient prophets came straight out of Yūsuf's imagination.

Some villagers began to realize that if Daniel was an imaginary figure, then so were all of the characters in Yūsuf's dreams. By this point, the shaman's whole following was based on the reality of his dreams; his credibility as a shaman was entirely dependent on the notion that Daniel and the other prophets were, in fact, real people and not just fictional characters.

As the doubters spread their views, Yūsuf began to lose adherents. The crowds were shrinking, and with them Yūsuf's meagre income.

Then one day, to Yūsuf's delight, a Jewish traveler passed through Kiambu. He had escaped from persecution in Germany and had managed to grab a few scraps from his family library before his home had been burned to the ground on Krystalnacht. Now he was wandering through Kenya selling some of his personal items to help make ends meet.

Among the items he was selling was a torn piece of parchment showing two figures being put into an oven. It was wrapped together with some strange writings that nobody in the village could read. Yūsuf invited the traveler into his hut, and he laid the parchments out on the table:



**Lebstudien.**  
100 Gramm Butter u. 200  
rühre man recht  
Schlage 7 Eier mit ein  
ter kalter Milch und rühre  
und nach mit 500 Gr  
wehl unter die Butter.  
alles recht innig verbunden  
an 100 Gramm  
100 Gramm Ros  
Kade hina

*More und*

*ein Lebstudien  
in sieben Stunden  
u. Wilhelm Löff*

After taking one look at the fragments, Yūsuf was immediately overjoyed. This fiery furnace had to be the same one he had heard about during his travels. Surely this was a sign from the ancient prophets to prove their own existence to his humble villagers!

Nobody in his village had ever seen characters like the ones on the parchment, so it would be up to Yūsuf to decipher the code for them. He began the process by placing his finger on each character and concentrating with all of his energy until he drifted off to sleep. When he awoke, he wrote down whatever he had dreamed as the interpretation of the particular character that he had been pointing at. He then used the scenes from his dreams to sketch in the missing gaps on the parchment. He kept this routine up over several days while the villagers patiently waited outside his hut.

When he was finally done, he called the villagers together.

“To our joy,” he proclaimed, “we now have absolute proof that Daniel was real!”

The villagers gasped and cheered in response as he presented some twenty translated pages.

“Look at the marvelous history that the spirits have guided into our hands!” he pronounced.

He hung the first page of his interpretation above his entry way so all who wandered past could see the sacred parchment.

“These figures were drawn directly by Daniel himself,” Yūsuf said, “As you can clearly see, the evil King Nebuchadnezzar is placing Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego into the fiery furnace!”

“We know the Book of Daniel is true!” some of the villagers began to shout in unison, stunned and overwhelmed by their good fortune at having run across this sacred, ancient parchment.

“The accompanying text is written in Assyro-Babylonian, which I have been able to translate with help from the spirits,” Yūsuf said, “The writings tell how a winged angel carried the trio out of the furnace.”

The symbols on the parchment were completely different from any form of writing anyone in the tribe had ever seen, so they took Yūsuf at his word. Completely unaware of Yūsuf’s embellishments, the crowd began chanting praises and working themselves into a frenzy. The Jewish traveler stood at the back of the crowd, smiling contently at his good fortune. He needed to get on his way, so he meandered through the crowd and approached Yūsuf to request payment.

The shaman had no money of his own, so he asked for help from the villagers. “Surely this treasure is worth more than houses, lands, or pearls!” Yūsuf exclaimed.

His followers agreed and managed to collect enough gold to pay the traveler his asking price, each of the contributing villagers thus becoming co-owners of the most ancient manuscript ever to have been found anywhere on the planet. But most importantly to them, the parchment proved Daniel’s existence outright and justified their adherence to the shaman’s teachings. Finally, rather than having to take Yūsuf’s interpretations on faith, now they had real, physical evidence of his connection to the world of spirits – these were actual words written with an actual quill that the actual prophet Daniel held between his actual fingers!



6.  
**Zopfuchen.**  
 100 Gramm Butter u. 200  
 rühre man recht  
 schlage 7 Eier mit ein  
 ter kalter Milch und rühre  
 h und nach mit 500 G  
 Mehl unter die Butter.  
 lled recht innig verbunden  
 an 100 Gramm  
 10 Gramm Rosi 11.  
 Kade hinau

7. 8.  
*Morg und*  
 9. *ein Lübenogpfif.* 10.  
*in sieben Thaisan*  
*u. Wilfalm Lüpff* 12.

**Explanation:**

- |                          |                                           |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| 1. Nebuchadnezzar        | 7. Maks-tar, meaning greatest             |
| 2. Shadrach              | 8. Nasha-bar, or Daniel in the Lion's den |
| 3. Meshach               | 9. Khalooa, Ezekiel the prophet           |
| 4. Abednego              | 10. Bakhta, Noah's Ark                    |
| 5. The Fiery Furnace     | 11. Khalta, Priest of Baal                |
| 6. Chai, meaning trinity | 12. Basmalookh, the Tower of Babel        |

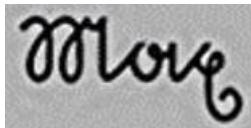
The villagers were so excited about the finding, in fact, that Yūsuf’s closest adherents formed a “School of the Shaman.” One of this committee’s tasks was to help Yūsuf develop a lexicon to aid those who might undertake the translation of similar parchments that would surely be discovered in the future. With each entry to this piece of work, Shaman Yūsuf related the true meaning behind Daniel’s writings, and the translations expanded into many verses for each of the characters depicted in the parchment.

The grapheme that Yūsuf had interpreted as the character Chai, for example, received the following entry:



“The character Chai depicts the three heroes Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Above the trio are an angel’s wings, carrying them out of the oven. In the reformed Aramaic language, Chai is interpreted as angel in the first degree, as the Holy Trinity in the second degree, and the third degree is so sacred that we cannot even dare to write its meaning.”

The word that Yūsuf had interpreted as Maks-tar received this entry:



“This is the Assyro-Babylonian word Maks-tar, meaning greatest. In the first degree, Maks-tar represents the greatest commandment, which was not to be revealed to the world for hundreds of years but which was revealed to Daniel as the instruction to *Love your God and your Neighbor*. In the second degree it traces the orbit of the greatest star in the Cosmos, inside of which is housed the world of spirits. The third degree remains a mystery.”

The Shamanites eagerly anticipated further discernments and strove to live worthy enough to receive the future interpretations that had been promised regarding the yet-to-be-revealed mysteries and symbols. In the meantime they busily transcribed copies of Yūsuf’s translations and wrapped them into holy scrolls that were distributed to faithful adherents.

Over the next few years, the villagers adjusted their theology to match the lengthy dissertations derived from the Parchment of Daniel. Due to some of their stranger customs that arose from this new theology, however, they faced a great deal of harassment from neighboring tribes that wanted nothing to do with this newly evolving religion. In the end, they were driven from their village and went high up into the hills of the jungle to be able to worship their chosen spirits without opposition.

They still needed to survive financially, so Yūsuf began sending his adherents out to sell copies of the Parchment of Daniel to the tribes in the surrounding valleys. He visited many villages himself, ruffling feathers along the way by making obstinate claims about his connection to the world of spirits. Especially disturbing to his neighbors was Yūsuf’s claim that only Shamanites get access to the world of spirits – and that Yūsuf himself would be standing guard as the gatekeeper. In the face of the growing conflagration, eventually he set off on a journey from which he never returned, slain by the knife of a competing shaman from a neighboring village.

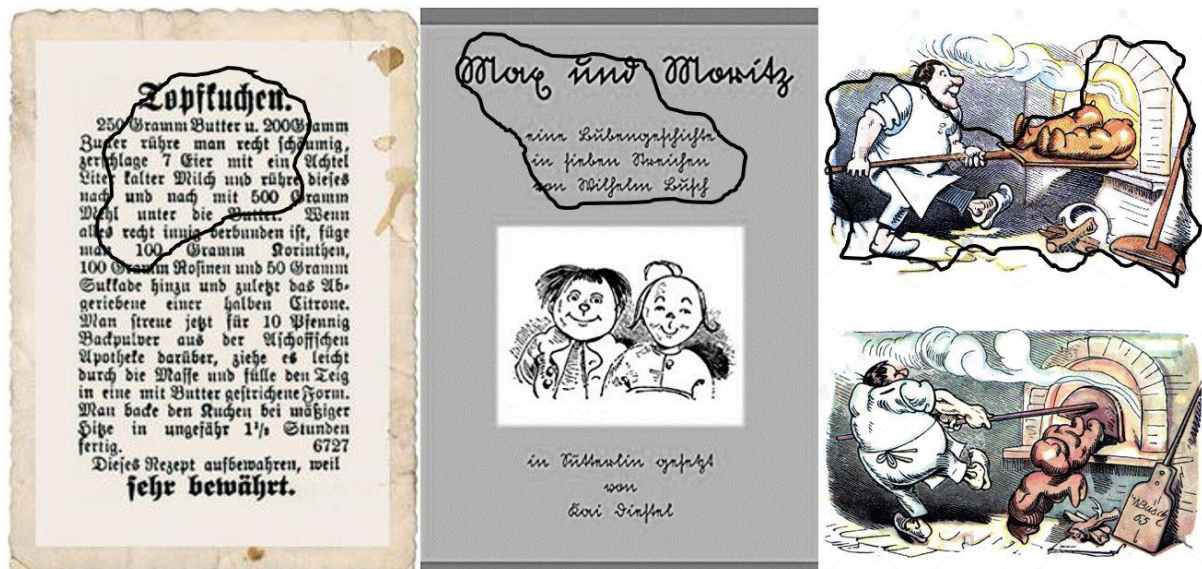
Upon Yūsuf’s death, the Shamanites strengthened their resolve and held true to their faith in his interpretations.

In the meantime, some scholars in Nairobi had obtained copies of the parchment fragments and debated the meaning behind them. Actually there wasn’t much debate; the scholars all agreed that the characters in the transcriptions had nothing to do with Babylon but that they were really written in German. Rather than being thousands of years old they were at most a few hundred years old.

The scholars asked the Shamanites for the actual fragments so they could prove or disprove their authenticity once and for all with carbon dating. Unfortunately, though, Yūsuf’s hut had been burned down during the earlier attack on the village – and with it all of the parchments in his collection.

Convinced that Yūsuf must have had Daniel’s real writings in his hut, the Shamanites continued to send copies of Yūsuf’s interpretation to the surrounding villages. They faced a great deal of opposition and were disappointed that the original transcripts – and the proof of their validity – had been lost.

Or so they all thought...until a few years later when a German museum curator – unaware of the Shamanites’ existence – decided to put some artifacts collected from pre-war Jewish homes on display. Among the museum’s acquisitions were the possessions of a Jewish traveler, which included some parchments with the very same characters Yūsuf claimed to have translated. In fact, some of them lined up exactly with the missing pieces in the Shamanite transcripts. The articles on display included several pages that fit together perfectly with the fragments that Yūsuf had deciphered:



The pages were from a story about two mischievous little boys named Max and Moritz, written by the German comic artist Wilhelm Bush. One of the cautionary tales related how Max and Moritz broke into Meister Bäcker’s bakery and ended up being baked in his oven – a typically German tale of consequence for bad behavior. The other page was simply a recipe for bread dough. If there had ever been any argument about the actual contents of the Parchment of Daniel, this newfound discovery was sure to lay the issue to rest.

Everybody now agreed that the character Chai was simply the conjoined letters c and h in the Fraktur font. Maks-tar had nothing to do with the great commandment or a big star in the cosmos but was just Max’s name written in Sütterlinschrift. Nebuchadnezzar’s head, of course, never belonged there in the first place.

Undeterred, though, the Shamanites appointed an expert named Huniblea, the most educated member of their tribe, to defend their case. Huniblea had mastered several Germanic languages, including English and Old German, and had even become well versed in the Sütterlinschrift and Fraktur scripts in which the original documents were written. He firmly believed in Yūsuf’s interpretation of the story and went to work debating the so-called scholars of Nairobi in a written rebuttal.

“Look here,” Huniblea challenged the other scholars, “without any knowledge of Latin or Roman characters, Yūsuf translated the conjoined ch that as the character *Chai*, which just so happens starts with a “C” and an “H”. Coincidence? Or inspiration?”

The Shamanites were amazed at his expert wisdom.

“And besides,” he continued, “Yūsuf correctly interpreted the original meaning of the word *Maks-tar*, which in addition to the obvious cosmological relevance just happens to be a real Finnish word meaning *to deposit*, just like these poor wretches were being *deposited* into the fiery furnace. And besides that, the interpreted word starts with “Maks”, which could be written phonetically as “Max”, which scholars have now unanimously agreed is the real name of a real character depicted on the original parchment!”

The Shamanites were pleased that Huniblea had reached a consensus among the scholars.

“Yūsuf could not have known that these characters spelled Max without divine assistance,” Huniblea continued, “Max, of course, also relates to “maximum,” meaning the *greatest* of the commandments, which is to love. And to prove the divine authorship and the symbolic mysteries contained in the parchments, if you take those same characters in German, and read them in English, they spell out the word ‘Love’ – which we all know is precisely what the Greatest Commandment refers to!”

The Shamanites ate it up! Huniblea had successfully refuted all of the arguments against their shaman. Nobody else in Yūsuf’s tribe could speak German or English, so they relied on Huniblea’s interpretation and agreed with his conclusion that the only possible way to explain all of these coincidences was that Yūsuf was guided by the spirits in his dreams with a correct translation.

Of course the arguments didn’t make any sense at all to the legitimate scholars. Although much of what Huniblea had previously published was actually well respected in their circles, they saw no relevance nor any credible basis whatsoever for his new arguments. Where sources were available, he had cited them; where they weren’t, he simply made them up, taking on faith that his cause was just and that his ultimate findings would be validated in the future.

The scholars, meanwhile, drafted their own paper, successfully debunking Huniblea’s claims with clear evidence of the parchment’s actual meaning; unfortunately for the Shamanites, though, the believers were told by their reigning chiefs not to read the scholarly rebuttal but rather to let Huniblea have the last word.

So despite the overwhelming consensus to the contrary – most of which never made its way to the Shamanites – they adhered to their belief that the Parchment of Daniel was true. The more the outsiders accused Yūsuf of being an imposter, the more they clung to their convictions and kept transcribing more copies to deliver to every corner of Africa through a growing network of messengers.

Eventually every other scholar in every other country reached the same conclusion as those in Nairobi: The so-called Parchment of Daniel was a children’s book that had nothing whatsoever to do with Daniel. As time went on, some Shamanites adherents also became fluent in both Sütterlinschrift and Fraktur and eventually agreed with the rest of the world.

In the end, even the Shamanite chiefs recognized that their original claim was untenable and had to acknowledge that the translation was, in fact, not literal.

Most Shamanites were never told about this change in position, but those who looked into it generally came to the conclusion that the shaman was just plain wrong in this case. He had seen an opportunity to unite and inspire his followers without any idea of what was actually written on the parchments, and he ran with it.

Unfortunately for any doubting Shamanite, though, the chiefs who followed in Yūsuf's role kept up a battery of very bold statements claiming that if anything written by Yūsuf was wrong, everything was wrong. So those followers who wished to continue their life as Shamanites – even those who came to realize that Yūsuf had not the slightest skill as a translator – have had to find a way to make him right.

Over time, a wide range of theories has emerged among their ranks to rationalize this predicament. These include some of the following positions:

- The shaman didn't actually sign any affidavit saying that he translated the parchment himself, so his helpers in the "School of the Shaman" are to blame for any errors.
- The verb "translate" has many different meanings; in this case it means "think about."
- The parchments were just a tool or a prop to help assist Yūsuf's clairvoyance, getting him in touch with the Old Testament stories and inspiring his dreams of the spirit world.
- The arguments for and against the translations should all be ignored because the proof is in the heart, not in the mind. Proponents of this theory say, "The Parchment of Daniel is a book about love. And love is good. And reading it makes me feel good. I know it makes me feel good. So I know that it's true. Which is why I know that Yūsuf is a true shaman."
- There must have been some real Babylonian characters written by Daniel's own hand in the shaman's possession, which we are no longer worthy to see, so the God of Fire had to consume them in his own fiery furnace when Yūsuf's hut burned down.
- It's just too complicated. Those who fall into this category say, "Huniblea is so much smarter than I am, so I'm just going to have to trust him. And in the end, Yūsuf will explain all the tough questions to me when I meet him at the entrance to the world of spirits. In the meantime, I might as well do what I can to follow his teachings so he'll let me pass."
- The caricatures were admittedly drawn by Wilhelm Bush in the 1800s, but the author actually based his book on tales that had been passed down orally over generations – all the way back to Babylon. When Bush wrote the story of Max and Moritz, for example, he had actually just been thinking about the evil King Nebuchadnezzar, so he modeled Meister Bäcker after him.
- Yūsuf made it up.

So what is the most likely answer? Yes, any of these explanations might be remotely possible. Some of them, of course, come with dichotomies of their own that defy logic, but is there really more than one probable explanation?

A growing number of Shamanites have reached the last of these conclusion and the simplest of them all: that Yūsuf was just plain wrong. Some of these doubters have left their jungle village and have come down to wander around the big city of Nairobi, mingling with bustling crowds and gazing up at the buildings. But most of the doubters remain in the village and stay silent about their belief that Yūsuf's translation of the parchment is bogus. That's an understandable response, because their fellow Shamanites have been told not to associate with anyone who reaches such a heretical conclusion – in this case one that threatens to crack the keystone of the Shamanite faith, which just so happens to be founded on Yūsuf's ability to translate. And who wants to lose their family and

friends over arguments about ancient Babylonian linguistics when tribal life revolves around so much more?

The shaman himself is, of course, long gone now, but the Shamanites are going strong – and they still distribute copies of the misinterpreted parchment. Despite their chiefs' acknowledgment that Yūsuf's interpretation was incorrect – well, “not literal” is the way it is typically described – it remains part of their holy writings, wrapped into the same scroll that includes in its title, “Of all the true scrolls, this one is the truest.” The Shamanite chiefs all know full well that Max isn't Shadrack and that Meister Bäcker isn't Nebuchadnezzar, but their sacred scroll still says it is. And most Shamanites still believe it to be so. In fact, to this day most Shamanites will claim to *know* those translations are true and to have received direct confirmation of that fact from the world of spirits.

So the next time a Shamanite messenger comes knocking on your door with a reproduction of the oven drawing that depicts Meister Bäcker as the evil King Nebuchadnezzar, please let them know it's just a baker. It never was nor ever will be Nebuchadnezzar. Tell them their chiefs have agreed with that conclusion and that it's ok to Google confirmation of that fact. Maybe the Shamanite standing on your doorstep will have to rethink his or her position; and if that messenger manages to start seeing things from another perspective, he or she might just decide to send a request up the chain to have the Parchment of Daniel removed from the sacred scrolls – thereby freeing themselves from the complicated justifications they have spent their life chasing.

~~~~~

Now I'll need to bring this little ditty about Max and Moritz back to Nathan's challenge, to which my answer is the reluctant, self-incriminating acknowledgment:

I am that (sha)man(ite)!

And if I can bring this back to the other challenge question that was posed in the Introduction, what do you see here?

I'm happy to hear any opposing explanations, but I'm claiming that it is merely an excerpt of Max's name, written in Sütterlinschrift. Maybe it looks like it says *love*, but I know where it came from, and I can trace its origin.

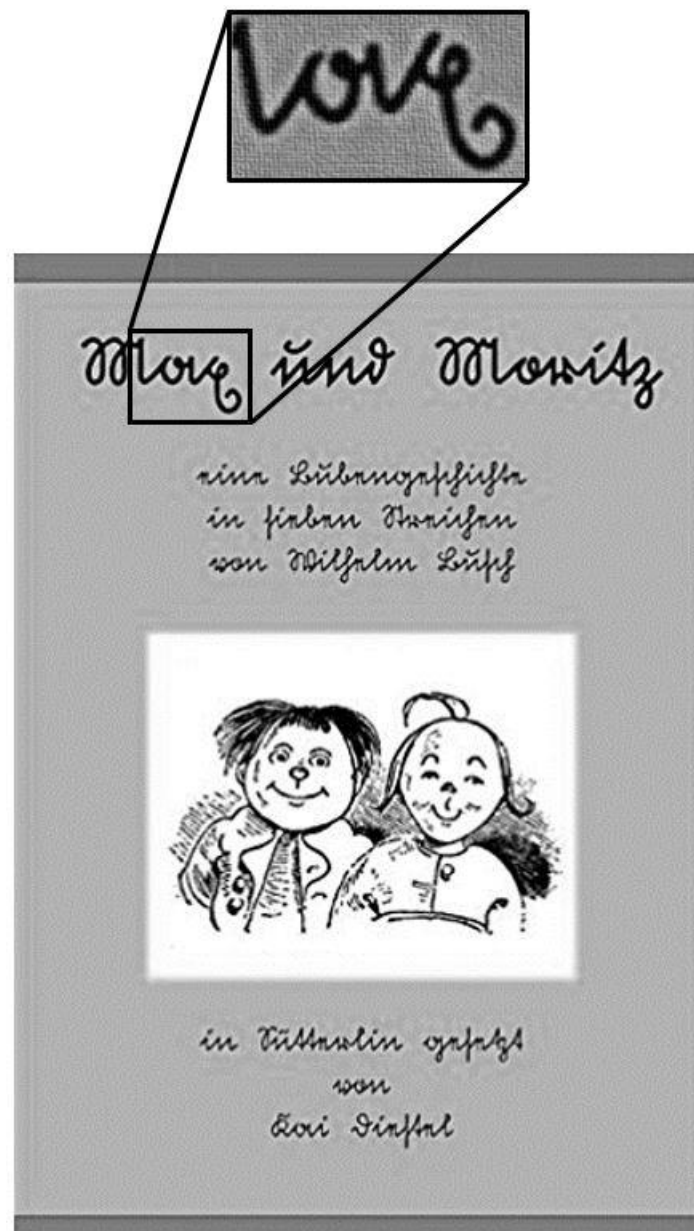
"But that's not fair!" you may say, "You deliberately excluded a piece of the first letter by cropping it out."

Yes, exactly! Deliberately withholding pertinent information to alter an intended meaning isn't fair at all. And that's the whole point here. When integral parts of the truth are deliberately withheld in an effort to manipulate perception and maintain control – effectively preventing an informed decision among those who limit their information to sanctioned sources – well, in that case I'll go ahead and call the foul!

If I show you the whole page first, and you then decide you'd like to focus on the part that looks like it says *love*, well that should be your choice – but you should at least have the option of developing a full knowledge of what lies outside your crop lines before you make your decision.

For those who decide to focus on what lies inside the box, or for those who choose to avoid even glancing at anything that falls outside that box, I have to respect that choice. But when those in authority issue specific instructions not to even look at what lies outside the box under accompanying threats of eternally broken bonds to family, friends, and God Himself – and when my own decision to look outside the box and see any validity in the contents of the rest of the page

eradicates my own validity and shuts me out of my own children's weddings to boot – well, in that case I am driven to do whatever I can to end the ostracism. In the end, that's the whole reason I'm spending my time writing up my own reflections here and posting them online!



Now if you go ahead and substitute the name of Mr. Hor for Mr. Max in this tale, the analogy becomes my reality, and the rest of this journey of mine merely follows an equivalent path to its conclusion.

~~~~~

*There once was a shaman from Kenya,  
Who's fictional like Zarahemla,  
Now that he's been debunked,  
with the trials he flunked,  
There's luckily no more dilemma!*

# My Reality: Meta-Mormonism

"Let's not have any bizarre middle ground" – Jeffrey R. Holland

## Growing up Mormon

I was born and raised a Mormon, and that distinction has formed a part of my identity for as long as I can remember. When I was a kid, we were not just the only Mormons, but also the only Americans in our Bavarian community. So I quickly got used to the sense of being very different from everyone else. Even after we moved back to the U.S. as I approached my teens, Mormonism was always one of the things that identified me as well as my family – thanks in part to this article that appeared in the Grand Rapids Press along with a caption on the front page of the paper:

### Night at Home Keeps Mormon Family Close

By Chris Meahan

Fifteen years ago, Kent Price stopped a service in his home and handed it to his wife and daughter. The couple and daughter discovered an engagement ring, a diamond necklace, a watch, and other items. Since then, there have been many days and nights in the home, but their faith has kept them close.

And the couple now shares this love and faith on its own. It's not just a family night, it's a family. It's the love and faith that binds them together. It's the love and faith that binds them together. It's the love and faith that binds them together.

One week Kristina is in charge of refreshments, for instance, and she sets it up to her to decide on a game to play.

Although the evening is structured around a variety of activities, the emphasis is always on togetherness and to renewing their relationship with God.

Some weeks the family will chop wood, others they'll go to the store, and Monday nights will be spent watching television.

After discussing family matters, Kristina Price gives a lesson on the Lord, and Kristina Price conducted a lesson to introduce the scriptures of each member of the family. Each child, as well as the parents, was asked to do things for or of the church. Kristina Price said she was proud to do, before asking another family member to do it.

For example, Kristina said, Kristina can't play the dulcimer, although Kristina can. When she failed to perform, he or she asked the one who can do so.

"We all have talents we can develop," Kristina said in his children after the activity. "We all have talents that we can use in a family to do things, even though we're not perfect. I want to thank to thank to do a baptism. Your mission will be to teach others to be a name and to teach others. We're all of one."

Following that activity, the family members retired to the bedrooms where they participated in their own brand of chores. They played cards and read one another to go to who they were. They prepared to be good, strong, obedient and faithful servants.

Dad, mom and the kids laughed and funked on the floor, grabbing each other in embraces, holding like the best of friends. Children were allowed to sit in the back of the chairs, the best of friends.

One of the most common family members put their words what some family members said.

"I like to do the activities together," Kristina said.

"I like it because we can do fun things together," Kristina said.

"These family night traditions are important because you have to live with them."

"I enjoy it," Kristina said, "because it's a good way to spend the week. There is a feeling of closeness that just seems to carry over."

Kristina, the youngest member of the clan, had no words of wisdom to offer her family.

"I like to do the activities together," Kristina said.

"I like it because we can do fun things together," Kristina said.

"These family night traditions are important because you have to live with them."

"I enjoy it," Kristina said, "because it's a good way to spend the week. There is a feeling of closeness that just seems to carry over."

Photo Provided by CHRIS MEAHAN

*'We're not holier-than-thou... Our family night is just one of many ways a family can spend special time together'* — Kent Price

Bible study is an essential ingredient in Family Home Evening. Kristina, 11, reads a passage from scripture as her parents, Kent and Kristina, listen, as do brother Kristina, 9, Kristina, 13, and brother Kevin, 2.

My high school in the small town of Grandville, Michigan was located right between the world headquarters of several very devout, reformed Christian churches, and our rural home was just down the street from the Grandville farmhouse where the Zondervan brothers formed a publishing company – one that continues to churn out much of the anti-Mormon literature that is distributed around the world today. After the article featuring our family home evening was published, our Mormonism stood out to classmates and co-workers like horns on our heads.

Although very, very small in terms of membership, Mormonism in Michigan was also very prominent. The state had been governed by Mitt Romney's father, George, who had also run some of the large automobile manufacturing firms that were the lifeblood of Michigan's commerce.

Michigan National Bank had been founded by another Mormon, Howard Stoddard, whose son had taken the helm of the bank and preceded my father as president of the Grand Rapids Stake. With this conspicuousness in a community that perceived Mormons to be either dastardly deceivers or tragic victims of deceit ourselves, my father was asked to appear on Christian radio interviews along with other LDS figures in the area. Unsurprisingly, they ended up playing defense most of the time. In listening to these interviews (including one with Ed Decker, the maker of the file *The God Makers*), I learned some very useful apologist tactics for myself; in my own dealings with classmates I grew accustomed to using euphemistic terms, focusing on benign explanations for complex questions, dodging uncomfortable issues and – as a last resort – casting them aside with an opportunistic change of topic.

### *Seminary*

Every morning by the time the bell rang at Grandville High, my sister and I had already driven across town to attend seminary classes with other LDS students from across the Grand Rapids area.

One of the topics we covered during my freshman year of high school was the *Pearl of Great Price*, a set of LDS scriptures that draws its name from one of Christ’s parables about valuing the Kingdom of Heaven above all earthly possessions. I didn’t really know much about it beforehand, except that my father used to introduce our family with the groaner, “we’re the Price family...as in Pearl of Great!”

My grandmother had given me a set of scriptures for my priesthood ordination a few years earlier; I remember flipping through the pearly pages during church meetings and staring at the Egyptian hieroglyphics that form a focal point of the Book of Abraham:



In our seminary class, we were told that Joseph Smith had been granted special powers to translate the true meaning of the symbols. For years, it had all seemed very mysterious; now I was finally going to learn what it was all about.

Our teacher sure seemed to know his stuff; in fact, he used to appear on radio talk shows and in VHS videos defending the Pearl of Great Price and other Mormon scriptures as an apologist. In his seminary lessons, he would cite studies by the likes of Hugh Nibley and other LDS scholars who had written lengthy dissertations full of evidence that supported Joseph Smith’s ability to translate ancient languages. I didn’t understand much about it – and frankly my interest in the subject didn’t last all that long – but the message I took from the lessons was that the historical authenticity or *historicity* of the subject matter was at least defensible by people who were a lot smarter than I was.

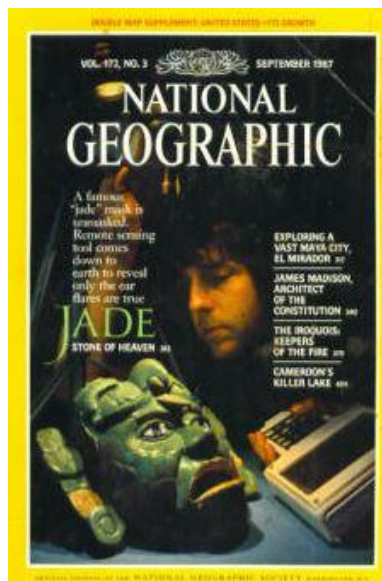
When we covered the Book of Mormon during my senior year of high school, I had a different seminary teacher who was particularly excited about Mesoamerican archaeology. He

would show us videos about the Aztecs, Mayas, and Incas and used to give firesides presenting archeological evidence in support of the Book of Mormon. I still wasn't all that interested in ancient artifacts, and between my late-night pizza delivery job, sports practice, and college prep exams, I ended up sleeping through most of the seminary lessons – but again, the message I received was that some form of evidence for the historicity of Book of Mormon settings actually existed. And given how much had already been unearthed, I assumed that further investigations would keep yielding even more convincing proof.

### College

I headed to BYU after high school and started preparing to enlist as a missionary – which really made me wish I had paid more attention in seminary over the years. I definitely didn't want to get called out trying to teach others something I didn't know much about myself, so I decided to do a bit of studying on my own to try to catch up. In addition to the required Book of Mormon courses and my engineering workload, I signed up for some anthropology courses as well. I thought the course material might help me cover my bases just in case someone were to challenge me on the plausibility of the Book of Mormon or other LDS scriptures.

I felt lucky to get into an honors archeology class covering Mesoamerican cultures. The course was taught by Ray Matheny, a notable archeologist who had published quite a few articles in National Geographic and leading scientific journals.



Dr. Matheny and his colleagues at BYU's New World Archeological Foundation were well respected in their field and had produced some ground-breaking research that was recognized for its thorough scholarship. The articles covering their findings became our texts, and I found these course materials to be absolutely fascinating; I especially enjoyed the field trips we took to dig sites and ancient ruins.

Most of the other boys in the class, like me, were about to depart on Mormon missions. On the last day of class, one of my classmates spoke up and said, "Brother Matheny, we've heard all of these lectures about ancient America, but not once have you mentioned the Book of Mormon. How come?"

His answer was simple and probably scripted from his previous classes; without even looking up, he said, "This is an archaeology class, not a religion class."

I thought that would put the question to rest, but this particular prospective missionary wasn't satisfied with the answer.

"But Quetzalcoatl –"

"Look, Quetzalcoatl was not Jesus," Dr. Matheny said abruptly.

Like me, most of the students in the class had seen LDS videos claiming that the legend of Quetzalcoatl sprang directly from Christ's appearance in America, so it was a bit disconcerting to hear that denial coming from a BYU professor.

"What about the Tree of Life stone?" the soon-to-be Elder asked, citing another example from Church-sponsored videos, "Isn't that evidence for the Book of Mormon?"

"No, it's not."

"So in your eyes, is there any evidence at all?"

"Sorry, I can't talk about that," Dr. Matheny replied, "but I do think we should talk about the more pressing matter of your final exam."

We all gave each other puzzled looks. Did he mean *can't* or *won't*?

This rather alarming revelation probably should have shaken me to the core, since I had been armed with this supposed proof since I was a kid. Let's have a look at a photo taken in 1977 outside the rented space where our little church branch used to meet in Rosenheim, Germany, for example:



I was only six years old at the time of this photo, but I remember staring at the posters in the window for what seemed like hours while we waited for my dad to get out of his meetings. So let's zoom in and see what this particular poster says:



Among other claims, under the caption “Archäologische Bestätigung”, which essentially means confirmation or proof, is a depiction of the “Tree of Life” stone. Given Dr. Matheny’s response, he was clearly convinced that it had nothing whatsoever to do with Lehi’s dream. As for myself, I really didn’t know what to think of it all.

Considering I was about to spend the next two years of my life trying to convince absolute strangers that Book of Mormon stories were real, perhaps I should have thought the crumbling case for Book of Mormon historicity through to its conclusion. But instead, I talked myself into the apologetic notion that the *absence of evidence* for a series of events didn’t necessarily constitute *evidence of the absence* of those events. Maybe we just weren’t very good at spotting the evidence!

The Kon-Tiki and Ra Expeditions had proved that Nephi’s voyage was at least possible, after all. [I had actually seen the Kon-Tiki raft and the papyrus boat Ra II in Oslo, and my parents told me at the time that Nephi must have sailed the same sort of craft!] With DNA ancestry, LiDAR imaging, and other sciences just getting off the ground, I trusted that – if real – the stories I had learned in the church’s primary and seminary programs would eventually be corroborated.

Although I was shocked at Dr. Matheny’s refusal to defend the historical authenticity of the keystone of all Mormon scripture, honestly, I probably only gave the subject about five minutes’ thought at the time. With the stress of finals week looming, I filed the question away for another day, dove straight back into my exams, and then headed home to Michigan to continue my mission preparations.

### Mission

The Berlin Wall was disintegrating, and a few weeks after finishing my freshman year at BYU, I was excited to receive a mission call to East Germany, signed by President Ezra Taft Benson himself

– a man who had dedicated part of his own ministry to the Church in East Germany before the wall went up.

Having grown up in Germany, I realized that many Germans knew more about Native American culture than most white Americans themselves. This rather odd twist is thanks to the fact that the widest-read German-language author, Karl May, devoted much of his writing to supposed travel reports of his interactions with Native Americans in the Wild West. I had visited the Karl May Museum as a child and had grown up reading his stories of Winnetou and other Native American heroes. May had begun spinning tales from an early age to lift himself from a life of poverty and delinquency, and his stories were so detailed and descriptive that when it was revealed that his accounts were, in fact, fictional – and that May had never even been to the Wild West – many Germans simply couldn't believe it.

May's birth home and the museum dedicated to his legacy were within my new mission boundaries; coupled with the fact that another very popular German-language author, Erich von Däniken, believed in the Book of Mormon migrations (but claimed in his books that the Jaredite barges were flying saucers piloted by aliens!) I knew I was going to be facing a whole lot of people who already had their own theories about the origins of the Native Americans. How was I realistically going to convince them that the inspiration for their folk hero, Winnetou, might have been a Lamanite with Hebrew ancestry?



*Will the real Winnetou please stand up?*

Just before I shipped out for boot camp at the Missionary Training Center in Provo, our family took a road trip to see the Nauvoo Pageant, a theatrical presentation of an episode of Mormon history presented in the shadow of the burned-out remains of the Nauvoo Temple. As we approached the gates, we passed picketers who were handing out books claiming to contain “the Truth about Mormonism.” Over the years, my high school friends had often handed me similar tracts, which I respectfully accepted...and then dutifully threw in the trash where I had been told they belonged. This time, however, I felt like I needed to know what everyone else was saying. I definitely didn't want to find myself getting blind-sided by a well-read inquirer as a missionary, so I

took a copy of everything they had – and then spent the 12-hour ride home sifting through things I might have to defend my faith against.

Some of the claims forced me to do a bit of soul searching over the next few weeks as my departure date drew closer, but I also took anti-Mormon citations with a measure of scepticism – thanks in part to the timing of the Hofman bombings that had tragically taken two innocent lives right in the middle of my seminary education. Mark Hofman, a master forger and con artist, had succeeded in proving that the LDS Church would pay very large sums of money to cover up embarrassing parts of its history; but the way it was framed in my own Sunday school classes, deceitful forgers such as Hofman must have been aided in their craft by the devil himself in order to fool the Lord's elect. If the Salamander Letter was a forgery, for example, what else might be fake? Allegations that Joseph Smith had multiple wives; funerary scripts that bore resemblance to the Book of Abraham; Brigham Young's rationalization of the Mountain Meadows massacre? Any document casting doubt on the official party line must have been forged with the assistance of Satanic forces who were prepared to fight the Kingdom of God by any subterfuge necessary!

I wasn't sure which sources to accept and which to reject. Having heard the arguments both ways, though, I came to the conclusion that the gospel was meant to be taken on faith. So that's just what I did: I "turned it off" and cast aside my analytical doubts, clinging instead to feelings – not just to my own, but also to the convictions of those people in my life and in my ancestry who continually testified of the spiritual witnesses they had received that the Book of Mormon and other LDS scriptures were absolutely and literally true. While this road-trip literature review opened my eyes to other sides of the dice, I still believed that a case could be made in defense of Mormonism's claims – spiritually, philosophically, and historically.

On arrival in Germany, I spent much of my time in an administrative role as the mission office manager for a brand new mission, coordinating a team responsible for missionary transfers, housing, finances, travel, licenses, resident visas, and other logistics – all in a political system whose bureaucracy had just collapsed without a clear replacement; the transition from communism to capitalism sure made it an exciting time in history!

With the euphoria that accompanied the collapse of the iron curtain, many former East Germans were initially very excited to learn about new philosophies; after the office closed each afternoon, we would hit the streets to teach those who wanted to learn more about Mormonism. We primarily taught atheists who had been raised in a communist system and who were convinced of the fallacies of organised religion as a whole. Rather than covering individual tenets of Mormonism as many missionaries around the world do, most of our discussions ended up being philosophical dialogs about the existence or non-existence of a supreme being, an afterlife, or of anything supernatural or metaphysical at all. Sometimes the points we covered got me thinking deeply about my own upbringing and convictions, but I still needed to come up with some form of a response to relay in our discussions; in the end, each missionary – myself included – eventually assembled a combination of scripted answers, personal narratives, and convictions to respond to almost any concern.

When questions arose relating to the authenticity of the Book of Mormon, for example, we would dutifully haul along our portable TV/VCR unit and show videos like the newly released "[Before Columbus](#)", substantiating the claims with archeological proof. With Dr. Matheny's doubts fresh in my mind, I had to bite my tongue during the parts where the narrator claimed that basements were baptismal fonts, a tree carved into stone came straight from Lehi's dream, a Mayan stela depicted the same flood that floated Noah's Ark, and that the feathered serpent was Christ himself!





*Carving of Izapa Stela 5 – the “Tree of Life” stone*

Despite these incongruities, I still held fast to the overall message of the Mormon restoration; when doubts crept in, I fell back on the absolute miracles that followed us – things that to this day I can’t begin to explain any other way. Coupled with my own heritage and the conviction of those who came before me, I convinced myself that divine guidance couldn’t possibly intervene for a false cause. Given this overarching belief in our mission, the imaginative stretches and ludicrous little lies in our videos didn’t seem quite so wrong.

#### *Back to College*

When I returned to BYU after my mission, I was asked to teach church history and other topics as a Sunday school teacher. I was living in a foreign language dormitory at the time, and our stake presidency and high council included John Welsh, Steven Ricks, and other notable Mormon scholars and apologists. Due to their familiarity with foreign languages, they loved to visit the foreign language ward that I was a part of, and occasionally they would attend my gospel doctrine class.

So I found myself standing in front of a Sunday school class, freshly returned from my German mission, while sitting in the seat facing me was the guy who discovered chiasmus in the Book of Mormon as a young missionary in Germany himself. And next to him was the guy at the helm of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS), a group of researchers whose mission was later adopted by the Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research (which morphed into the current center of Mormon apologetics, FAIRMormon). Who was I to teach them anything at all about the scriptures?

At every opportunity during a lesson, the stake visitors would raise their hands and tell the class about the Hebrew, Aramaic, or Egyptian translation of whatever scripture we’d be discussing. We students were all amazed at the depth of their knowledge; after all, their research was being presented around the church as absolute proof of Book of Mormon authenticity. While we were sitting in class, for example, new mainframe computers acquired by BYU were running “wordprint analyses” developed under their guidance to prove the independent authorship of each of the books within the Book of Mormon; graduate students under their command were continually discovering antiquated chiasmic patterns that matched modern-day revelations; and DNA studies were being launched by their partner institutes with the aim of conclusively confirming the ancestry of the Lamanites among us. I was definitely in over my head!

With these guys in my class, I certainly didn’t want to just recite my lessons from the standard manual, so in preparation for each class, I dug as deeply as I could into the real setting behind the stories. The recent September Six excommunications had been an effective warning

against wannabe intellectuals who stray too far with their research, so I tried to stick with sanctioned sources from the official church history for my course material. Even so, I still ran across obscure accounts of events that I hadn't ever heard in previous lessons. I found the details absolutely fascinating, and in the process I felt like I got to know Joseph Smith very closely – not just the deified depiction of him from the authorized lesson manuals, but the raw man himself...right along with all of his strengths and his flaws.

In reading journal accounts from himself, his family, and his followers, I felt his drive and his desperation in trying to hold his flock together: one day while on a journey with a group of his adherents in dire need of motivation, for example, a pile of bones was uncovered on the side of the road, and Joseph launched into a detailed story about how the bones belonged to a giant Lamanite warrior named Zelph. Later during a similar journey, a pile of rocks became a Nephite tower; a mound marked the spot where Cain killed Abel; and the remains of an old wall became the altar upon which Adam offered his first sacrifice to the Lord! I don't know if he believed these stories himself, but far-fetched as they sound from today's perspective, his followers back in the day sure ate it up! Like medieval parishioners who were awestruck at the splinter of Christ's cross that had miraculously found its way to the display case in their very own cathedral, the Mormon militia carried Zelph's oversize thigh-bone with them as a relic of their divine mission and as a trophy of their incredibly good luck.

I wasn't quite sure what to think of these stories; I certainly didn't possess the mental flexibility to take them literally, try as I might. In defiance of everything we know about human origins and migrations, did I need to convince myself that humanity had sprung from the North American continent, somehow teleported itself to Africa and the Middle East, and then returned to a Pre-Columbian New World where grand battles were fought to the last man, all within earshot of the same pile of rocks encountered by a 19<sup>th</sup> century traveling band led by Joseph Smith? Or did the weary travelers just need a faith-promoting story, and Joseph Smith was there to oblige?

After reading enough of the many fantastic, eccentric stories originating from Joseph Smith, I began to see some of the same habits I recognized from Karl May – who was also incredibly gifted at coming up with detailed adventure tales to serve his purposes and get himself out of tricky predicaments. My apologies in advance for the Book of Mormon pun...but time and again, I kept finding signs of Joseph's demonstrated ability to literally make Shiz up on the spot out of pure self-preservation – fighting to maintain his position, protect his reputation as a prophet, and keep his only publicly acknowledged wife by his side. At the time in my own life, though, I relied on the sliver of a possibility that these second-hand accounts were all misunderstood or perhaps originally relayed by Joseph Smith as a fallible man and not as a prophet. Zelph's name was never spoken from the pulpit or canonized into scripture, after all!

When the Pearl of Great Price came up on my teaching roster, however, I found myself unable to make the same argument – given that the hieroglyphic characters and canonized translations had been accepted by every modern LDS leader to the present day. The problem, of course, was that the characters that were printed in my scriptures didn't actually mean what my scriptures said they meant – an undisputable fact that had long since been acknowledged by Mormon and non-Mormon scholars alike.

I read as much as I could about the subject, including Hugh Nibley's dissertations; I even went to see him speak in person whenever I could, searching for some trace of divinity to pit against the view that the parchments were nothing other than common funerary scrolls – and that the traveling mummies presented Joseph Smith with the opportunity to give his people a badly needed

morale boost. To accept the Pearl of Great Price as scripture, however, I really had to stretch my brain to redefine commonly understood terms. “By the hand of Abraham” really meant “originating from the mind of Abraham but sacrilegiously altered over time,” for example, and what we were actually looking at in the facsimiles were copies of copies of copies of some long-lost sacred scrolls that couldn’t actually be substantiated – all as part of some intricate test of faith to set believers apart from soul-less sign-seekers. During the transcription process, of course, the pagan Egyptians had substituted images of the deceased in Abraham’s rightful place and put magic spells, liver jars, and phalluses in the place of divine symbols.

I found myself feeling a bit overwhelmed trying to prepare lessons that would pass the scrutiny of the church’s preeminent apologists. But I was an engineering student, after all, and not a religious scholar of any sort; given my workload, I really didn’t have the time to dig through all of the facts. So in the end, I just took the view that we only had a small snippet of the original materials, and that the scriptural text that had not the faintest commonality with the glyphs must have had its source in some lengthier record that only Joseph Smith himself had been permitted to see. Despite these imaginative stretches and in the face of his blatant mistranslations, I did end up finding a few apologetic arguments that I couldn’t explain away with any reasoning other than attributing the final product to inspiration – which is where I decided to park my thoughts.

#### *Meta-Mormon*

And so I kept teaching – and continued to experience miracles in my life – after I left BYU and got married. And when our kids came along I had even more deeply personal, spiritual experiences that were accompanied by absolute signs of divine intervention that I still cling to today. At the time I took those miracles as an indication that I was on the right track with the LDS faith, trusting that more truth would be revealed someday to explain the discrepancies I kept running across in Mormon doctrine, policy, and history.

Somewhere along the way, the RLDS Church that claims its roots through Joseph Smith’s son was renamed to the more ecumenical *Community of Christ*. Along with that change, they also began to officially adopt a non-literal interpretation of the Book of Mormon, allowing it to be seen as a 19<sup>th</sup>-century religious text rather than an actual, ancient record. I had always preferred their presumption that Joseph Smith was just plain wrong about polygamy and a few other cringe-worthy doctrines that he introduced – and when I read about their changing view of the Book of Mormon, I realized that I was much more comfortable with that perspective as well; but I also recognized that the whole house of cards comes toppling down if you pull the Golden Plates – the cornerstone of all the cards in the foundation – out from under the structure.

I just couldn’t quite bring myself to take all of Joseph Smith’s claims literally, though, and over the years, I began to take on a more metaphorical view of Mormonism. Occasionally I would run into other “Meta-Mormons” along the way, and I recognized the familiar double-think dichotomy and cognitive dissonance they had chosen to live with. It seemed ridiculous when I saw others in that situation, but somehow I kept on adopting it for myself. And I kept right on teaching Sunday school from a figurative perspective for another twenty years, justifying my lesson material by never actually stating a conviction that the stories were real. Bilbo Baggins, Toto the Dog, and Charlie Brown have all made it into General Conference talks ahead of Zeph, after all!

I could teach a lesson about Aesop’s dog, for example, without literally having to believe that a real dog actually saw its reflection in the water and dropped its bone. I could rationalize presenting the story as lesson material by saying “Aesop taught...”, “As the story goes...” or adding

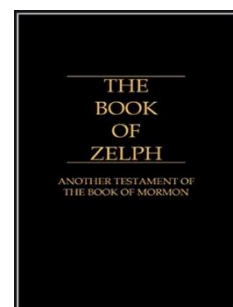
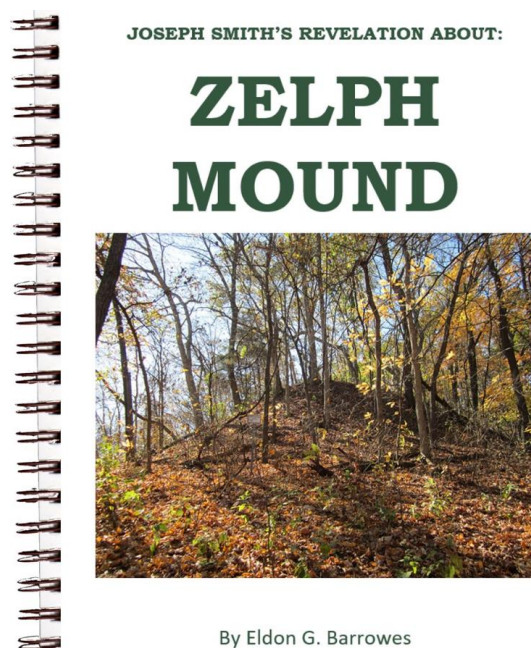
other disclaimers. Maybe the fabled story did happen somewhere in the real world at some point, or maybe it didn't – but does the reality of the tale really matter? At the risk of echoing Paul H. Dunn, whose recitations from the Tabernacle pulpit turned out to be greatly enhanced (to say the least), isn't the moral of the story the whole point?

I wasn't sure where to draw the line between fact and fiction, and I started taking the same approach with the Liahona, the Army of Helaman, and the Rameumptom, avoiding statements about my own convictions that might otherwise have been outright lies – or open dissent. If having a foot in each boat is a proper analogy, I was nearly doing the splits trying to use the moral of each story to justify teaching lessons about events that I was beginning to think of as being somewhere on the fictitious spectrum between parables and fables.

Always leaving a slim possibility for ambiguity in my brain, I began to treat the Book of Mormon and Pearl of Great Price as "inspired fiction" in my third-person lessons, recognizing some of their inherent truths and believing that Joseph Smith had been prompted to write those words in order to inspire us to be better people – without actually believing that Hor was Abraham or that Moroni was an actual, ancient Native American warrior with Hebrew blood.

Was I really so different from other Mormons after all? I mean, if you really pressed any other fully believing, rational-thinking Mormon, for instance, they probably didn't actually believe that the actual thigh bone that the actual Mormon Militia actually had in their actual possession actually belonged to an actual giant Lamanite warrior who was actually named Zelfh...or that they could actually trace their own actual DNA coded in their actual blood back through to an actual ancestor who pre-dated all of humanity and offered actual sacrifices on the actual rock that found its way into the actual wall that Joseph Smith actually pointed out to his actual posse...or that the actual piece of papyrus that actually found its way into Joseph Smith's actual hands was actually the oldest written document ever actually discovered anywhere in the actual history of this actual planet!

Joseph Smith's followers went to their graves believing every one of these things and more with an absolutely literal conviction – and with his full encouragement; do today's LDS apostles believe all of these stories themselves? Literally? If so, their minds are more limber than mine. If not, why should I treat Joseph Smith's claims about Moroni any differently than his claims about Zelfh?



Of course, the standard LDS answer is to pray about it with the expectation that the Spirit of the Lord will burn your inner soul with the truth while you're left with a stupor of thought in the face of falsehood. So if praying about Moroni feels good, but praying about Zelph seems a little weird (to put it mildly) does the answer have more to do with God or with the common consensus of ambient Mormonism? If I was really honest with myself about it, I realized that my own *stupor of thought* sure didn't stop with Zelph!

With this dichotomy in mind, I kept wandering around in the no-mans-land middle ground of *inspired fiction*, meanwhile retaining my adherence to accounts of visions and angels and inspiration and revelation – not just from church history but from my own ancestors as well. These stories couldn't be proven wrong, I figured, so I felt comfortable taking at least those personal accounts on faith.

### *All-or-Nothing*

As I continued to serve as a teacher and in various other church positions over the years, though, I came to realize that there is no place in today's LDS Church for a Meta-Mormon. Over and over again, I heard General Conference addresses focused on the black and white view that LDS theology – including a literal, historical belief in LDS scripture – is either all right or all wrong.

Jeffrey Holland, a sitting apostle, has stated that a figurative interpretation of the Book of Mormon is “an unacceptable position to take—morally, literarily, historically, or theologically.”

“Latter-Day Saints must reject these ideas,” states the BYU Religious Studies Center's *Historicity and the Latter-Day Saint Scriptures* in the preface for the aptly named article “No Middle Ground.”

“There is no middle ground,” a number of LDS prophets from Joseph F. Smith to Gordon B. Hinckley have repeated verbatim from Temple Square.

Elder Oaks of the current First Presidency stated in that same BYU publication that those who “rely on scholarship” in determining whether the Book of Mormon is, in fact, an ancient record effectively “deny the Holy Ghost” with their actions. They deserve to be told, “Get thee behind me, Satan,” he said further, stating that bowing to scholarship on that matter is an offense to Jesus.

His further statements on the topic echo the Book of Mormon examples implying that those who can accept its truth without evidence are to be revered while those sign-seekers who ask for evidence are to be shunned and trampled underfoot as Anti-Christ. Joseph Smith himself said that a man immediately gives away his role as an adulterer by the mere act of asking for a sign!

Hearing these sorts of admonitions sent my mind spinning every time. Having been continually warned against the devils and demons who demand proof of sacred things, was I out of line in wanting to investigate claims of historicity? Did my scepticism constitute adultery? Was I mocking God with my questions, making demands that only a spooky son of perdition would dare to request? Was I committing sacrilege by assuming that some form of a fingerprint – even just a single footprint – would have been left by former empires with populations in the millions?

Over the years, I had heard many prophetic warnings against intellectualism – including the prediction that those who overanalyze the gospel will “think themselves right out of the Church” – and I genuinely tried to avoid falling into that trap. Frankly, I never even considered myself smart enough to be an intellectual – to this day I still don't – but I certainly wanted my religious views to at least align with simple reason...and to be able to stand up to some basic questioning.

According to Elder Oaks, “Honest investigators will conclude that there are so many evidences that the Book of Mormon is an ancient text...”

I’m sorry, but I just don’t see it. So where does that leave me? As a dishonest investigator?

Honestly, I think he means that honest investigators should simply stop investigating in the traditional sense if they wish to find evidence in the traditional sense; from what I can gather, the only honest investigation that will lead to actual conviction comes in the form of feelings and spiritual witnesses. Any other form of inquiry will come up short – or will have to be propped up by unsubstantiated claims that have been effectively debunked many times over.

Elder Oaks argues that you cannot prove the Book of Mormon to be non-literal through scholarship; I guess I would agree that it is theoretically impossible to prove a negative – to prove conclusively that a recorded event did *not* occur. As far as the First Vision, the Priesthood Restoration, the Spirit of Fire in the Kirtland Temple, and other notable events in LDS history, nobody will ever prove that the eye-witnesses did *not* see what they say they saw; as a matter of fact, even a later denial wouldn’t actually prove anything at all. Likewise, as Oaks states, proving Moroni’s non-existence would require an absolute knowledge of every human inhabitant of the Western Hemisphere at the time. So he calls the matter a draw, stating that you’ll never be able to prove it one way or another – which leads him to the conclusion that you’re better off just taking the question of Book of Mormon historicity on faith.

[Although the phrase “Just because it’s made up doesn’t mean it’s not true” might be intended as a joke, you could legitimately apply it here in keeping with this chain of arguments; because in that spirit, nothing I make up can be absolutely proven to be false. That’s why court rooms have to employ the use of “reasonable doubt” rather than absolute certainty; otherwise there would be far fewer convictions!]

Lopsided as the factual arguments are, let’s go ahead and agree to call that one a draw and leave the question of Book of Mormon historicity open-ended for now; but in the case of the Book of Abraham, you most certainly *can* prove the positive, real meaning of the characters. There is no need to attempt the impossible by proving a negative in that instance. It certainly doesn’t take any advanced degree of scholarship to arrive at that conclusion; but it does require you to at least ask the question and look up the answer...which is precisely what I did when I was asked by my church leaders to teach lessons about symbols that I couldn’t make any sense out of – from a manual that made even less sense with its explanations.

Boyd K. Packer said that those who venture into teaching “advanced history” are covenant-breakers; in the same “milk before meat” talk about enemies of the church, he placed intellectuals third on the list of dangers to his Church (after the “gay-lesbian movement” and feminists). Shortly before these statements were issued, I met both Elder Oaks and Elder Packer in a question-and-answer session with the missionaries in my area. During the meeting, one of my fellow missionaries asked a question about the lack of congruity between ancient claims and credible clues on the ground. Elder Oaks pointed his finger directly at the missionary who had asked the question.

“Elder,” he replied sternly, “Let me warn you of the danger of asking that sort of question!”

He moved on without answering the question and left us all quaking in our Doc Martens, wondering if his apostolic discernment had uncovered a Judas in our midst.

This foreboding warning was still fresh in my mind as I prepared my gospel doctrine lessons many years later. Was I pushing things too far by delving into the origins of the facsimiles? Was I

turning myself into an enemy of the Church, effectively joining forces with the Devil himself, by digging up for my own resolution the now well-known fact that the supposed translations of the Abrahamic facsimiles are in absolute error?

Before that truth had completely come to light, prophet after prophet had vouched for the authenticity of the incorrect translations. So what was I supposed to do when I ran across their contradictory statements asserting the truth of the translations under the pretence of speaking for God? From my modern-day vantage, could I question words spoken in a previous century and still keep my temple recommend? What about words spoken today by those currently at the helm? Could they possibly be off track with their own statements?

### *Defining Astray*

Another sitting apostle, M. Russell Ballard, has echoed previous LDS leaders by stating, “We will not lead you astray. We cannot.”

Now I’ve never quite been sure how to rationalize those sorts of claims. I understand that quotes in that regard are not meant to infer infallibility, but I would be much more comfortable with a less totalitarian statement, for example, “We will always try our best not to lead you astray. But sometimes, history has shown that those in our role have done so. So please weigh anything we say against your own convictions and moral code. Don’t accept our words and act on them just because we said so; please think it through for yourself with God’s guidance before you decide where you stand!”

Because the absolute impossibility that those at the helm of the church might lead their members astray is canonized right into the Doctrine and Covenants, however, the only way to justify the otherwise authoritarian statements along those lines is to redefine the term *to lead astray*. To me the term means to lead someone off track, whether it’s a huge deviation or a minor departure from the correct path. But LDS lesson manuals redefine *astray* to mean complete apostasy, claiming that anything short of a return to the dark ages is just part of the everyday fallibility that is commonly acknowledged.

So when Ezra Taft Benson preached from the Tabernacle pulpit that the “so-called civil rights movement” was part of a Satanic, communist plot and that African-American reports of police brutality at the time were unfounded, where does that direction fall? In my eyes, he was trying to convince members of the church to adopt his biased position and to avoid supporting racial equality, leading to the complicity of many temple-going Mormons in prolonging the battle for equal rights – and some to actively oppose it. Were these followers not “led astray” in this instance by words that were spoken by one of their prophets “in the name of Jesus Christ?” Now that the church has officially acknowledged that no racist teachings or principles should ever have been promoted in the first place, wouldn’t that talk originating from Temple Square fall under the classification of having led its listeners *astray*?

“Oh, that’s just a minor detail,” faithful Mormons might argue.

Really? I would say this particular deviation from the truth counts...and very much so. Casting it into meaninglessness today condones the same falsehood Benson was promoting at the time in opposition to MLK’s speeches.

Shouldn’t God have removed him from the pulpit if the statements about the impossibility of being led astray were true?

“But that was nowhere near a complete apostasy!” believers might assert. Well, if *astray* indeed means complete *apostasy* for the entire body of the Church, maybe future statements along those lines should use the word *apostasy* directly and drop the use of *astray* altogether – I, for one, am more than a little confused on this play on words, and I would guess that I’m not alone!

So where does this whole circular line of thinking lead me? I know Benson’s 1967 statements are not true. You know they aren’t true. We can say that he was wrong today, and today’s Church leaders might be able to justify that dissent as something short of “evil-speaking”. Yet if Russell M. Nelson were to issue a statement today, and I were to tweet my disagreement on the spot, the temple-going crowd would likely consider my criticism to be a sordid, covenant-breaking crime: evil-speaking of the Lord’s anointed.

But what if fifty years from now we all end up agreeing that it probably wasn’t a great idea to restrict leadership roles for women or to banish kids from primary if their parents are in a homosexual relationship? Will we then be able to use the same disclaimer that President Nelson was simply swayed by the day’s culture – just like today’s LDS essay on racism asserts about Ezra Taft Benson’s words in 1967?

LDS leaders *can* lead people astray. They *have* led people astray. But even if I throw out the word *astray* and change the statement to say that leaders of the church can, in fact, lead their membership down errant paths, I’m still left with binary statements claiming that you’ve either got to be *all in* or *all out*.

For years I was unwilling to be *all out*, so my only option in the eyes of church leaders was *all in*. I attempted to reconcile the spiritual witnesses and good feelings that accompany some of the teachings in Latter-Day scriptures with the absence of any academic validity whatsoever. And every time I came up short, I felt a bit guilty for demoting my faith beneath reason. Was I letting my brain overrule my heart?

Well, for me *all true* is simply not an option; there are enough mutually exclusive, contradictory statements and events to make that point a thousand times over. The impossibility of an all-true view is very clear to me and leaves me with two alternatives: *all false* or *partly true/partly false*. I have tried my best to find a comfortable position in the middle ground; but if you try to pull the middle ground away as an option – try as I might to claim it back as a viable place to hang out – I will find myself stuck in the uncomfortable position of having to choose one extreme or the other, one of which I simply cannot rationalize. An all-out exit becomes my only choice.

Over the years, I have wished that church leaders would stop making *all or nothing* statements; perhaps they believe that this threshing will lead more of us fence-sitters to the *all* than to the *nothing*, but as I looked around at my former mission companions, BYU roommates, and childhood church friends who have recently resigned from the church, it has become apparent to me that many of those who honestly inquire will be forced into the *all false* option unless there is some RLDS/CoC-style concession on the middle ground.

If you do force me into the position of choosing between two absolutes, my faith in absolutely every fragment of the LDS restoration is then contingent on Zelph being a giant and Hor being a time traveler. Can I claim, on the other hand, that there is *some* truth in LDS scriptures while questioning the historical origins of those scriptures? Or does that essentially constitute the commitment of high treason? As it stands, the mere act of claiming that a metaphorical middle ground even exists defies the current LDS prophet; if you make that claim, you’re effectively saying that he is wrong about his own convictions.



In Russell M. Nelson's first official address to the church he is now leading, he said, "Whatever your concerns, whatever your challenges, there is a place for you in this the Lord's Church."

Really? So what about people like me who just can't seem to swallow the historicity of the Book of Mormon or the Pearl of Great Price? Do you need to believe these stories literally to have a place in the Church?

M. Russell Ballard mentioned in a 2006 PBS interview that there are plenty of people who question the historicity of the Book of Mormon that are firmly in the church (at least "in their minds," he added). He also reassured any doubters that the church isn't going to take action against them, so long as their disbelief isn't seen as advocacy. [That sounds very conciliatory; the disbelief I have stated in this particular essay is benign, for example, as long as my words here are portrayed as my own opinion and not as an attempt to proselytize others. "Proclaim your faith from the rooftops," so the mandate goes, "but keep your doubts to yourself!"]

He then said that such silent positions would be *tolerated* for now, but he defined the Church's tolerance in this case to mean *patience* – under the assumption that the disillusionment is just a temporary ailment borne silently in bed that will pass in the morning like a flu bug or a runny nose.

Now I've heard some people say that a literal belief in Mormon historicity is not necessarily a pre-requisite for a temple recommend; Joseph Smith's name isn't even mentioned in the interview, after all. But with statements like those above, how can I and my fellow Meta-Mormons affirmatively answer questions sustaining the current leaders as prophets, seers, and revelators? Even if you only question things in private, the *private* temple interview will essentially lock the door to the temple for any Meta-Mormon who answers the questions honestly.

So sure, you'd be welcome to attend church meetings either way. But your daughter's wedding? Sorry, if you want to see her get married, you're going to have to say that you believe it all.

Does that mean you have to believe in the message of the restoration with 51% of your conviction? Or does it mean that any sliver of hope whatsoever that puts the probability above absolute zero represents belief? Over the years, I was able to realistically and honestly cling to some little snippets of historicity from Nibley's papers and apologetic sources that seemed vaguely credible. So if I redefine "I believe" to mean "I consider it a possibility," then I'm good for another two years! And barring that, perhaps I could take a multiverse view of *worlds without number* and bring myself to reason that there is a shadow of a possibility that the Book of Mormon stories actually happened somewhere in this universe or another!

These are some of the preposterous rationalizations I made in my head every time I was interviewed to renew my temple recommend; otherwise, I'd be sitting outside while my brother or sister or daughter or son got married – and I'd have to explain to my friends and family why I am choosing a path that in their eyes condemns me to an eternal separation from them and from God, which in the end is their definition of hell.

Seriously? If you honestly can't bring yourself to believe that millions of armed warriors disappeared without a trace, burying their weapons and clothing and campsites and buildings and horses and chariots so deep in the ground that nobody would ever find a hint of their existence – if you simply can't see the Book of Mormon timeline as an actual, literal, series of events that

transpired on our actual, literal planet...well then you just don't get a place at the table? If you can't stretch your brain into imagining that the hottest debate on the American continent a millennium before Columbus was over infant baptism – or that the ink on the papyrus in Joseph Smith's possession came from an actual quill held in the actual hands of an actual man named Abraham...you'll have to wait outside?

I can't seem to override my brain to accept these follies set in previous centuries, but my own inner conflict lay in the obvious implications of a non-literal belief on the modern-day prophet's role as God's sole mouthpiece on this earth – a belief that is not open for discussion as an entry requirement for any of the LDS temples dotting the planet.

I wavered for a while with these thoughts in my mind and then gradually did what many others in my position have done – settling for a mistrial based on a technicality in the face of overwhelming, incriminating evidence, using a hung jury to procrastinate the verdict off into the next life under the pretence of God's mysterious ways, believing that all will be revealed someday to resolve the apparent discrepancies. If I can redefine the word "faith" in the context of a temple recommend question to encompass that contingency act, in the meantime, at least I'd get to see my daughter get married!

#### *Talk like an Egyptian*

I kept walking this inane fine line during my temple interviews until July 8, 2014, the day the LDS Church published a nonsensical essay explaining away the inconsistencies in the Book of Abraham by redefining the word "translation" and attempting to refute the overwhelming evidence against its authenticity by making arguments for plausibility.

I found this new position to be horribly uncomfortable. The arguments themselves were so poorly constructed that they actually made the opposite case, each one constituting a contortion act that further amplified my discomfort. In essence, the essay *claims* that the Book of Abraham is not what it *claims* to be, but that it is still somehow divinely inspired. With that dichotomous divergence, the Church broke its own rule, entering the "bizarre middle ground" that its own standing apostles have derided as a non-existent fairyland.

I had been trying to wander around in that oxygen-deprived space myself for quite some time, but I had never run across official confirmation of its existence – and I certainly never expected it to become the new party line given the implications of that partial concession. For one, I realized that this new, precarious *stance* simply couldn't *stand* – unless accompanied by a retraction of the vast statements to the contrary that have been issued over the years...yet here it was in print, with no acknowledgment that a long line of holy men had quite vocally and forcefully taken the completely opposite position.

For years I had gambled on the existence of some hidden knowledge lying just beyond my brain's capacity that – if I could just manage to observe the universe with my spiritual eyes – would somehow allow this costly pearl to simultaneously be both true and false as the essay claimed. The concept that Schrödinger's cat can be simultaneously alive and dead is beyond my own mind's reach, after all, yet I accept that people a lot smarter than I am can comprehend the truth behind that conundrum. So why should I try to lift myself up to the level of an astronomer, pretending to be on par with those who can comprehend the mysteries of Kolob – like I have some place in the royal court of the Pharaoh, as depicted in Mormonism's sacred scriptures?

Well, by publishing the essay, Church leaders had forced me to review my own indefensible, uneducated position. In a way, I had hoped they would just keep their mouths shut about it, leaving the Church's current, official position as a mystery. Frankly, I had expected the facsimiles to conveniently disappear out of the next edition of the scriptures at some point. At least that silence would allow me to maintain my avoidance of the obvious dichotomy. That convenient option had now evaporated.

I knew the effort might culminate in a cowardly wave of a white flag, but I was expected to teach the material myself as an ordained teacher. So now that the Church's vulnerable position had been exposed for the world to take aim at, I really needed to know for myself whether I believed the translations to be real or made up. Do I stand to the last man to defend the fortress, or do I run for cover?

I made a fateful decision to do a bit of fact-checking, hoping to buttress at least one of the claims of authenticity I had clung to since high school with some form of confirmation. Right at the top of my Google search results, I ran across "[The Lost Book of Abraham](#)" on YouTube. I could tell from the description that this 2002 documentary was not sanctioned material. My trigger finger hesitated a bit, but eventually it submitted to my curiosity, and I clicked on a little white triangle that would unwittingly change my life.

In the video, my very own high school seminary teacher appeared with other Mormons supporting a case for authenticity. In the opposing seat was the University of Chicago's Robert Ritner, supported by a team of Egyptologists who laid out the real meaning of the characters in detail. The hour-long video exposed error after error in the Mormon version of the story; the case against authenticity seemed clear, and I found myself on the brink of surrender.

The video was over ten years old, though, so I hoped that a rebuttal had been posted in the meantime. I clicked around and found that, sure enough, the "anti-Mormon" video I had just watched could easily be debunked, at least according to the titles that showed up next in my suggested playlist.

"Come on FAIRMormon, give me something!" I said to myself as I clicked on what looked to be the most lethal weapon from the apologetic armory.

Well, unfortunately for my Mormon existence, the next video dropped a nuclear warhead on my medieval castle. The statements claiming historical authenticity and defending correct translations were so blatantly false, so obviously misleading, that not even my ignorance of ancient language could hide the fact that they were misfiring. They didn't even need a re-rebuttal!

It took only a few loudly pounding heartbeats to flip my world upside down. Instead of pointing my Davidian finger at the lying anti-Mormons as I had been taught to do, Nathan had shown me my own treachery. I had been part of the deceit, and what I thought was a barrel of lies turned out to have been the truth all along. I recognized the unbiased logic in Dr. Ritner's translation and the absurdity of trying to cling to a propped-up fabrication, patching the foundational defects with silly putty that had been stretched all the way from irrelevance to incoherence.

I was facing one simple, mind-bending conclusion that my Mormon piety wouldn't even allow me to say out loud at the time:

"Holy shit, he made it up!"

What that revelation might mean for the remaining aspects of my faith was yet to be determined, but there was no going back from this pivotal moment. To this day I can picture the setting: the room, the posters on the wall, how my computer was oriented, the color of the chair I was sitting in. If anything as substantial as the First Vision had ever occurred, I'm now convinced there wouldn't be ten versions of it. These sorts of profound, spiritual experiences get burned into your mind and become part of your own, single path of truth.

This was a watershed moment for me if there ever was one; in fact, now that I look back on it, I can divide my life up into BC and AD: There is *Before Clicking* and *After Debunking*. Up to that point I had been a practicing Mormon who wanted nothing more than to take a stand against those who were trying to tear down my own faith, so that I could firmly stand in front of a class, armed with at least a remote plausibility that the things I was teaching might actually bear some shred of substance. Now I found myself at the business end of a long string of dominoes, wondering if I should pull any of them out of the line-up to stop the cascading, snowballing chain reaction that was about to smack me down.

I can't say I didn't ever waver again. Hadn't Hugh Nibley, who is trumpeted as the brainiest Mormon that Mormonism has ever produced, actually discovered hidden truth and light that the secular scholars couldn't manage to refute? That's what I had heard him claim not just in one video recording after another but in person with my own ears! Was he wrong all along?

After watching the Egyptology 101 videos, I decided to look up each of the things I had clung to as arguments for the translation's possible validity based on my previous, pre-Google research. Armed with nothing but a search engine, I went back to Hugh Nibley's papers and found that he simply made up some of the sources for things that I thought represented a sliver of substantiation. Maybe he felt justified by his belief in the bigger picture, but I was surprised to find that what wasn't completely made up was stretched so far down non-relevant paths as to be absolutely meaningless as an argument. There is no need to restate these individual points here – they are freely available to anyone with an online connection who bothers to look; I just can't believe it took me twenty years to bother to look!

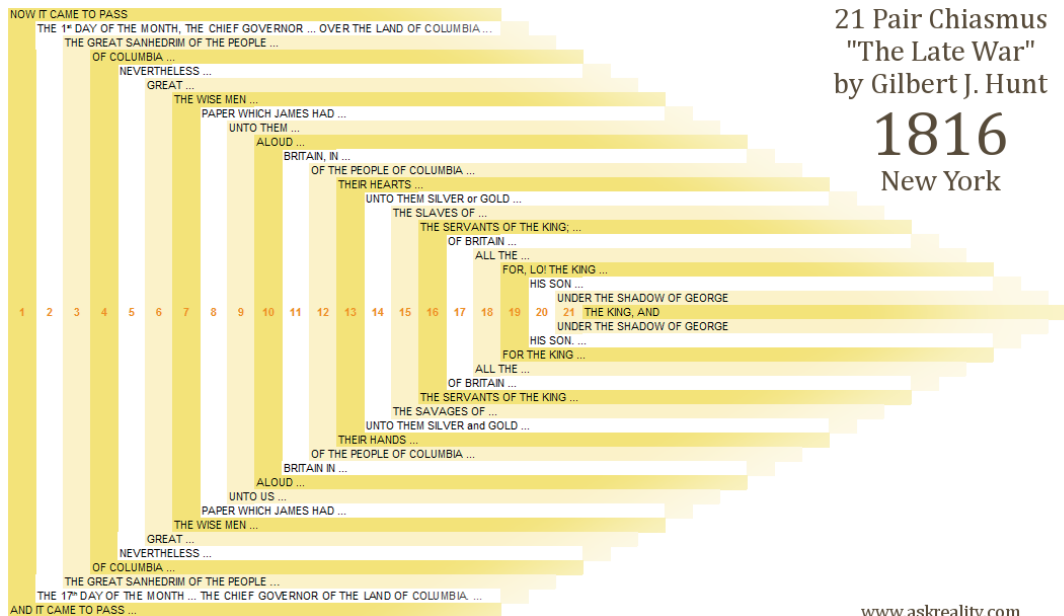
I also found that long after BYU's own archeologists had determined the irrelevance of the Tree of Life stone and other supposed evidence, Church-sponsored videos making these claims were still being distributed and were allowed to remain in the hands of motivated missionaries like me who naively showed them to credulous investigators.

One by one, I saw that every point that my seminary teachers had attributed to an ancient setting for the Book of Mormon and for the Book of Abraham had long since been dismissed – and many of the points had been conclusively refuted decades before I ever saw them presented as evidence.

I went back to every point of justification I had previously accepted and questioned each one anew. In many cases, where I had previously let FAIRMormon and other apologetic sources have the last word in debunking claims against an ancient setting, I found that the debunking had itself been debunked with truths that had, in turn, been met with silence. In case after case on every issue I could possibly consider, the last word stood solidly against the case for historicity, and the correlations I had previously bought into were stretched so thin that each one snapped.

They say there are lies, damned lies, and Mormon apologetics. At least that's what I say now. And I have found Mormon apologetic lies – Muhlestein's in particular – to be the damndest of them all!

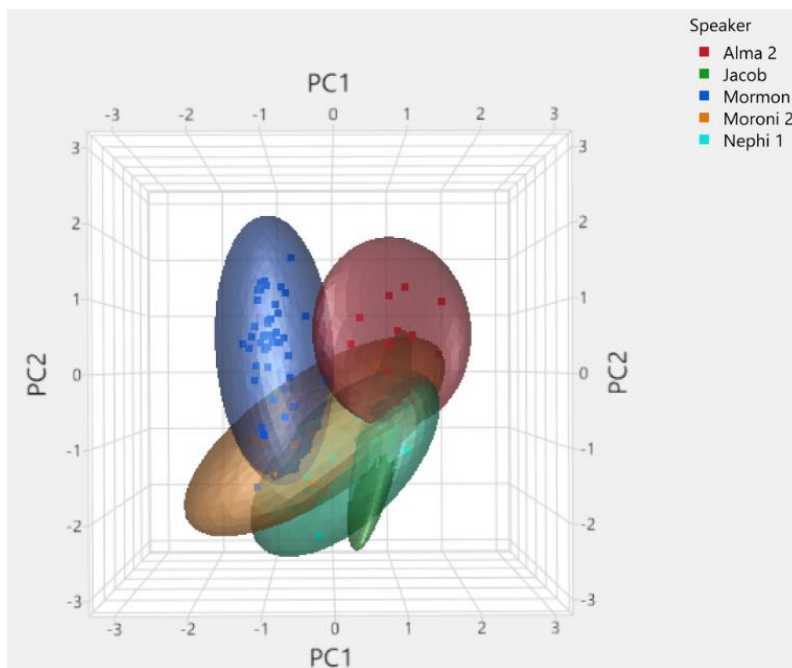
As far as chiasmus, for example, yes, you'll find it in ancient Hebrew texts. And you'll find it in the Book of Mormon. And if you stop there, that correlation might look significant. But if you don't stop there, you'll also find it in the works of Dr. Seuss. And in Lincoln's addresses and in MLK's speeches. Keep going and you'll find it in Mein Kampf, Trump's state of the union address, and even my latest environmental impact statement. If you run the same "clinically proven" laboratory analysis, you're bound to find it everywhere – not because it's Hebrew in origin, but because it's simply an effective means of communication.



21 Pair Chiasmus  
 "The Late War"  
 by Gilbert J. Hunt  
 1816  
 New York

www.askreality.com

And the very scientific-looking "wordprint analysis"? Again, if you plug the works of C.S. Lewis or any other prolific author into it with the same settings and variables as the Book of Mormon analysis, I'm willing to bet that it will give you the same result: highlighting different word patterns that seem to suggest different authorship, even when written by the same author.



All of this speculation about the origins of the Book of Mormon aside, the reluctance of the Church to acknowledge the real meaning of the facsimiles in the Pearl of Great Price – and to inform the body of the Church of that consensus – ended up being the spark that lit the fuse tied to my own imploding conviction.

If you compare Joseph Smith's translations to the real meaning of the facsimiles...well, I hate to say it, but they're so ridiculous that they are actually really, really funny...that is, until you consider the unfunny implications! For one, Joseph's racist and sexist bias is obvious in his interpretation of the facsimile in which the dark-skinned attendant (who in his mind couldn't possibly have an official role in such a sacred matter) is called a slave (he's not) and women that he couldn't possibly imagine having a place in such a patriarchal setting are called men (they're not...and they do play a role in the scene!)

And when you consider that within a year of having misidentified Hor as Abraham, Joseph Smith claimed to have seen Abraham in one of his interactive visions? Call me crazy, but if this were true, don't you think Abraham would have tapped him on the shoulder and said, "By the way, Joseph, that's not me there on the altar!"

When I was a kid flipping pages in my brand new scriptures during sacrament meeting, the Egyptian hieroglyphics all seemed very fascinating – especially those symbols that came with the caption that their meaning was not yet to be revealed! Would some future prophet unfold the true meaning behind the mysterious glyphs? Would additional records be unearthed someday in fulfillment of Joseph Smith's prophecies? Little did I know, both Mormon and non-Mormon scholars had already agreed at the time that the captions were wrong and that Hor was not Abraham – yet not a single Church-sponsored manual included the real translation!

Now I have no problem at all adopting faith in the absence of evidence. But when I see the concoction of fabricated evidence, or the fabrication of concocted evidence to support a pre-disposed faith – and particularly when I witness the suppression of information that contradicts that hard-line faith, now that I have a problem with!

With revelation after revelation about the manipulation of available information by those who controlled the sources – not to mention the fact that knowingly incorrect translations keep getting printed as scripture year after year – even the ideas I had taken figuratively in the past began to take on a new meaning; without any clear end to my chain of dominoes, things I previously saw as inspired fiction were getting demoted to just plain fiction in my mind faster than I could fathom.

Within a few weeks of reading the essay, I made a consequential decision to seek the truth and to follow it, regardless of whether it led me toward the LDS Church or away from it.

So with this knowledge and newfound resolve – and with my own kids approaching missionary age – I asked myself a simple question: Is Hor Abraham? If not, would I want my kids carrying captions out into the world stating that Hor is, in fact, Abraham – bound together with "the most correct of any book on this earth"? Can I really support that lie?

Maybe I'm nit-picking, but as long as that known falsehood is being officially propagated, I just can't seem to take any other official claims or denials seriously. If anyone wants to have a conversation about anything else in the LDS handbooks, how about we start by getting rid of the scriptural basis and claims of divinity surrounding the absurd translations first – then let's talk! If Joseph Smith can dismiss an entire book of the Bible as non-inspired writing in Song-of-Solomon style, couldn't his successors do the same to the facsimiles?

In this particular case I have to agree with Elder D. Todd Christofferson's 2018 statement that "all truth, including the truth that governs our present sphere, exists independent and apart. It is unaffected by my preference or your opinion. It stands independent of any effort to control or change it. It cannot be lobbied or influenced in any way. It is a fixed reality."

Here is a verifiable fact that in my opinion fits Elder Christofferson's definition of truth quite reasonably:



This is Hor.

Hor is not Abraham. No essay, no vision, no revelation, and no apostolic preference is going to change him into Abraham. Hor's identity is a fixed reality – a simple truth!

I don't know if Hor would have been flattered by his likeness here, but in this case Hor is named in the accompanying text, so we can't argue about his identity. When my daughter draws a flabby picture of me in pre-school and labels it "Dad", I can claim all I want that she meant it to be someone else, but I'd have to go back and change the past to insert someone else into the scene. In the case of Hor's breathing permit, inserting Abraham into the scene would likewise require the past to change – which stretches beyond the limits of any claimed miracle I have ever seen recorded.

Volumes of excuses have been published as to why Joseph Smith's misidentification can still somehow manage to represent truth. But none of these arguments change the true fact that Abraham is entirely absent from the scene...that is, of course, unless we can change the meaning of the action verb "to translate" into the alternative infinitive, "to think about," which is precisely the official position that the LDS Church is attempting to adopt, according to the current essay.

I'm sorry, but I just can't play that game anymore! I claim Hor's identity to be a truth just as I claim Newton's laws to be true, and just as I claim that Elder Christofferson's statement about truth is itself true; but does my opinion about the truthfulness or untruthfulness of a statement bear any relevance whatsoever as to its validity? What about my own standing in the LDS Church? Does that affect my own validity when I claim something to be true or untrue? For those who believe that when Russell Nelson speaks, "it is the same" as if those words were spoken by God's own voice, my ability to speak on the subject of truth becomes inherently tied to my own status in the church:



*"Some things are simply true. The arbiter of truth is God—not your favorite social media news feed, not Google, and certainly not those who are disaffected from the Church." — President Russell M. Nelson*

According to that statement, the instant my questions constitute “disaffection” from the LDS Church, my validity evaporates and my words about truth become meaningless. For those who adhere to that statement, believing the scriptures to be God’s word, and God to be the arbiter – the final judge – of truth, please open up the Pearl of Great Price and stare at the caption that identifies Abraham on the altar. Ignoring my own lack of authority, go ahead and use Elder Christofferson’s definition and decide for yourself: True or False?

I, for one, have come to the conclusion that Joseph Smith was just plain wrong – dead wrong – with his supposed translation. And I am beginning to believe that those who claim that there is no middle ground are perhaps right after all. Whether or not Joseph Smith believed that Hor was Abraham at the time is irrelevant. We know now that he was wrong. The LDS Church now acknowledges that he was wrong. So can we please stop trying to defend it? It simply can’t be defended! And given that the interpretation is wrong, pardon me, but the facsimiles have absolutely no place in a book of scripture. Scholars on the Church’s payroll are frantically redefining the term *translation* using older lexicons that stretch it into including explanations. But these aren’t even correct explanations! If the only way to keep categorizing the facsimiles as truth is to change the definition of the word *translate* to mean *think about*, well let’s “think about” what that means to the claims that Joseph Smith “translated” the Book of Mormon!

#### *Dominoes*

The more I ask around, the more Meta-Mormons I find: people who don’t actually have a conviction of the literal truth of the Book of Mormon or the Book of Abraham but continue to fake it because they have been forced into a system that collapses with any shred of doubt – a system that will lock them out of their own kids’ weddings if they express their disbelief. Some of these people continue to serve in prominent positions, sending missionaries under their jurisdiction out into the world to preach things that they themselves don’t actually believe. In this process, I have met people who won’t even tell their own spouse, their parents, or their kids about their doubts for fear of the fallout! They Google the truth quietly in their basements and delete their browser history like a porn addict. You can substitute in whatever expletive term you feel comfortable with here, but I’m sorry, that’s just plain [messed] up...to put it politely.

Now I’m definitely no Egyptologist, and I don’t have the slightest clue about Egyptian hieroglyphics, but a language is a language, and I do understand the translation process. And to really comprehend for myself just how untenable the current LDS Church arguments are, I had to think up an analogy of my own. The story of the non-German-speaking Shamanites in the previous chapter is the closest thing I could come up with to relate the Book of Abraham’s translation process to a language that I do speak fluently. Like David recognizing himself in Nathan’s parable, when faced with my own analogy, my culpability in the Shamanite charade has become glaringly obvious!

In itself, maybe the mistranslation doesn’t really matter all that much; but the consequences of that preposterous stretch certainly do matter if you let the dominoes fall. Here’s my simple conundrum:

1) If Joseph Smith misinterpreted the *real* Egyptian characters that became the Book of Abraham, whether in error or by design, I question his claim to have translated the *reformed* Egyptian characters that became the Book of Mormon, the keystone of the LDS faith.

2) Joseph Smith admitted that he couldn’t discern between the good angels and the bad angels who gave him instructions. Take, for example, the angel who convinced him to try to sell the copyright to the Book of Mormon...whom he later determined to be a representative of the dark



side of the force (after unsuccessfully attempting to follow his direction). When his wife Emma later discovered his secret relationships with other women, Joseph claimed that an angel told him to do it. Nobody can prove this claim one way or another, so we have to rely on his character. A man who claims that his secret affairs were sanctioned by the same God who guided his known mistranslations – and retroactively attributes bad decisions to evil angels and good decisions to angels of light – makes me question the source of his claims.

3) Joseph Smith and his successors taught and promoted racist and sexist principles. While sexist policies are still in place, the modern LDS Church has now denounced and disavowed all racist doctrines, practices, and policies as having been “led astray” by the cultures and customs of the day (admittedly using my own definition of the word *astray*). Hopefully there will be a similar declaration about women and LGBTQ members someday, but in this light, when the current LDS Church promotes exclusivity and implements discriminatory and sexist policies, given the fact that Joseph Smith’s views on the subject are now considered wrong by his very own successors, I’ll assume the trend will continue. In the meantime, I’ll trust my own conscience over the claim that Mormons will never be led astray by their leaders.

As for the rest of the dominoes, they’re still falling. Although it took a thirty-year process to completely knock over the first one, some absurdly translated pictograms are all it took to set the rest of the chain reaction into motion; in effect, my remaining conclusions about Mormonism all spring from the truth about Hor’s identity.

#### *Dr. Matheny*

So back to Dr. Matheny’s 1989 archeology class, I had no idea at the time just how deep his scepticism went. If Google had existed back then, I could have looked up exactly why he had to keep his mouth shut in front of our class: As it turns out, he had expressed his dissenting opinion at Sunstone conferences far too openly for the comfort of BYU administrators over the preceding years. His previous speeches included statements about the absence of any real evidence for the Book of Mormon whatsoever; he also ranted about the damage done by armchair archaeologists with a habit of churning out concocted evidence for Book of Mormon claims – often with the Church’s full support...and usually in collaboration with tour guides whose livelihood depended on believing customers.

Given the fact that every BYU professor must possess a temple recommend-style ecclesiastical endorsement, Dr. Matheny had to walk a fine line to preserve his academic integrity. A few of his off-campus statements are appended at the end of this chapter, including his conclusion that the Book of Mormon has “no place whatsoever” in its claimed setting. With these opinions in published print, his tenure at BYU must have been tied in with some sort of gag order preventing him from making further statements along those lines – at least while he was on campus. So when he told us, “Sorry, I *can’t* talk about that,” I think he really meant it!

Dr. Matheny spent most of his career working for the New World Archeological Foundation, an organization that originated with Mormons who thought it would uncover Zarahemla and other venues but soon had to change its mission to maintain its legitimacy; looking back at Dr. Matheny’s Sunstone statements now, it appears that he had gradually come to the same conclusion as the NWAFF’s founder, Thomas Ferguson – and to the same apocryphal conclusion I ultimately reached myself. Here is [Ferguson’s story](#):

<http://www.sciencemag.org/news/2018/01/how-mormon-lawyer-transformed-archaeology-mexico-and-ended-losing-his-faith/>

Even though I knew about the overwhelming lack of evidence as I was preparing to serve a mission – Ferguson’s dilemma is nothing new, after all – I honestly expected at least the plausibility of substantiation to increase over time. But the complete absence of any further validation in the face of a massive increase in the reach of collaborative scholarship, archeological digs, DNA testing, ground-penetrating radar, and other advances over the last three decades since my mission leaves only two choices in my mind: either the Book of Mormon is fictional, or there has been a divine cover-up of unprecedented scale. In other words, given the likelihood that the populations in question would have left some hint of their presence, the lack thereof can only indicate either deliberate concealment or non-existence.

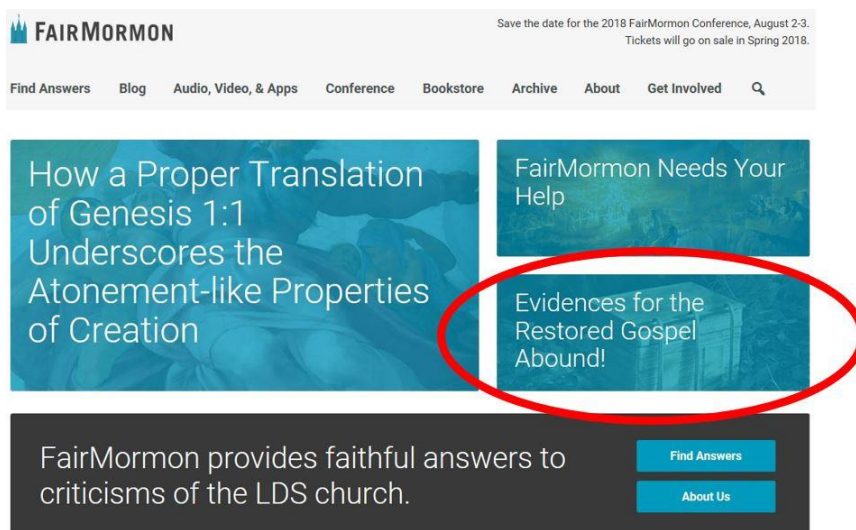
I’m trying to be open-minded enough to consider both possibilities, but I find deliberate concealment to be a very challenging exercise that pushes my brain beyond the realms of reality, especially as I begin to question every other aspect of my faith. In my eyes, whatever force managed to set the universe into motion would certainly possess the power to hide every trace of the Nephites, Lamanites, Jaredites, Mulekites, Hagothites, and every other society mentioned in the Book of Mormon from our probing curiosity. But why? What purpose would that sort of intervention serve?

Perhaps a divine force designed a deliberate cover-up as a trial for us humans in order to reward those who might be willing to take a leap of faith without evidence and to punish those who cannot bend their minds in that fashion? Is that possible? Remotely, I guess. Is it probable in the least? I seriously just can’t make that leap!

If this life is indeed a test, I, for one, believe that the creator of our souls and of this expansive cosmos would prefer to test us on something else – like whether we’ll be nice to the people we encounter along the way – rather than whether we can perform sufficient mental gymnastics to accept contradictory, flat-earth-style ideas that defy simple reason. I freely admit that I may be wrong, but at this point I’ll go ahead and grade my own take-it-on-faith exam and deal with the threatened consequences of giving myself a big, fat F on that test – which I hope from this day forward allows me to move on and turn my attention to what I believe to be the real test of this life!

### *FAIRMormon?*

Having flunked the leap-of-faith test, I can’t help but to contrast Dr. Matheny’s statements about the lack of evidence with this FAIRMormon screen grab from January 2018, which includes a depiction of the Golden plates along with a headline referencing the abundant evidence:



Those who limit their information to LDS sources may look at that image of the Golden Plates coupled with the word “evidence” and – like I did over thirty years ago with the window posters and seminary videos – say to themselves without objectively exploring the claims, “See? There is evidence for it after all!” Then, whenever they get confronted with evidence to the contrary, they might say, “Well, there is weight tipping the scale in both directions, so in the end I guess I’ll just need to take it on faith.”

I find it a bit ironic that my own final push over the edge came not from enemies of Mormonism but actually from those who try to defend it. Maybe my time spent traveling behind the iron curtain has made me particularly sensitive to – and repulsed by – propaganda that skews the truth with attempted manipulation, but reading the apologetic responses to those who challenge the historicity of LDS scripture manages to give me nauseating flashbacks to the 1970s and the indoctrinating nonsense I saw being propagated in the school materials of my East German friends.

I honestly began watching FAIRMormon’s videos on the subject of Abraham with the original intent to buttress my own faith – not to discredit it – but some of the content literally made me shudder! I watched unnamed scholars – who right off the bat claim to be well published, well respected archeologists – state for the record that the latest scholarly momentum for the case of authenticity is in the opposite direction to what everyone has been told – actually supporting Joseph Smith’s translations! All I can say is WTF! [I recently heard of a teenager who, when caught using that common initialism, explained to his parents that it meant “Well That’s Funny!” While we’re skewing the commonly accepted meaning of symbols, I’ll claim a similar stretch in this instance lest I offend; after all, it’s accompanied by an exclamation mark rather than a question mark, so it can’t mean whatever expletive you might think it means!]

FAIRMormon’s YouTube video descriptions say that they feature “top Egyptologists, linguists, and historians” who corroborate this position. These scholars are willing to put their professional credibility on the line in support of Joseph Smith’s translation (knowing of course, that their church-sponsored educational institutions will protect their academic reputations – or at least their jobs – from the typical fallout that would accompany defamation). Rather than presenting evidence as the YouTube titles suggest, nonsensical cases are contrived against academics and secular learning as a whole. The videos abound with cautions, such as “Be very careful in believing what you read because 99.9% of it is wrong. There are too many bad assumptions.” [Yes, this is a direct quote!] This is followed by the admonition that there are “only a few people who really know both the historical and Egyptological sides of the issue. That’s where you should go to get your information.” [Another direct quote, presumably referring to the five LDS Egyptologists appearing in the video.]

The self-proclaimed Egyptologists state that there are “thousands of unpublished papyri in the back rooms of museums” and that thanks to the amazingly fluid field of Egyptology, “Five years from now, we’ll see that we were all wrong, dead wrong.” Viewers are told that what has been translated amounts to only “1% of the known material.” Given the recent discoveries and the new evidence that is sure to come forth in the near future, they state that it is “foolish to value what we learn in school – when we know much of that is wrong – more highly than what we learn from God,” which is obviously “much more reliable.”

I initially called up those videos looking for truth – truth that would allow me to point my finger at the naysayers and expose their lies. Instead I faced the uncomfortable awareness that the rest of my fingers were pointing straight back at me and the organization I had spent my life promoting and defending. Instead of truth I had found lies and manipulative tactics used in defense

of indefensible claims. I had spent much of my mission feeling sorry for the East Germans who had been duped and deceived by Communist propaganda, claiming that I was there to help them replace their previous, phony ideology with absolute, God-given truth. To find myself as a source of similar tools and tactics was a disconcerting realization to say the least!

The characters in the apologetic videos believe that the more scholars learn about ancient Egypt, the more amazed we should all be at Joseph Smith's translation skills – they feel entitled to claim that there is a growing momentum of supporting arguments on their side. That may seem true if you only listen to their side. I don't need to state the obvious analogies to the propaganda spewing from German radio towers in 1944, but the FAIRMormon videos seem to give a similar impression that a cunning enemy is trying to deceive those who are fighting for their just cause. "Don't believe the news reports," those on the front lines are told, "Trust us!" The faithful fighters are told to only read orders that come straight from the top, and despite the overwhelming turn of the tide that would be obvious to any objective observer, the overall message of these videos is that "We are winning the war!" and that loyal patriots should "Keep up the fight!" because "Victory is right around the corner!" "...just as soon as we get around to sifting through the mounds of backlogged papryri," of course!

In reality, the momentum has been in quite the opposite direction: Every discovery since the mummies passed through Kirtland has weakened the case for authenticity. The supposed evidence that was in some cases heralded as initial support has quietly been dropped from the agenda over time. The "growing momentum" referenced in the video comprises nothing more than new hypotheses that just haven't had enough time to be proven wrong yet. Because a personal testimony trumps all evidence, however, in the end, the FAIRMormon videos conclude that the entire debate is in their words "a waste of ink".

In my opinion, these videos and the web page headlines shown above lie somewhere between misleading and deceitful on the dishonesty scale. But just like the long-since discredited videos about Book of Mormon archeology that I watched in seminary and then obediently showed to investigators, they are being shown to today's CES students, prospective missionaries, and prospective members without hesitation.

Now I have no objection to – nor any right to try to dissuade – anyone who chooses to take the restored gospel on faith. But let's stop with the charade that there is evidence. Sure, there is conjecture and perhaps even a slim case for plausibility; but not a shred of evidence exists in the commonly accepted definition of the word. Granted, FAIRMormon doesn't speak officially for the LDS Church, but the headline above restates precisely what Dallin Oaks and others at the helm of the Church have said about the mounds of evidence for historicity – which I have yet to find in published print anywhere. Perhaps the substantiation lies just beyond Google's reach; but all things considered, I'll have to side with Dr. Matheny on the credibility of the evidence uncovered thus far – unless, of course, we redefine the word "evidence" to mean "speculation". And I do have to acknowledge that plenty of that exists!

#### *El Capitan*

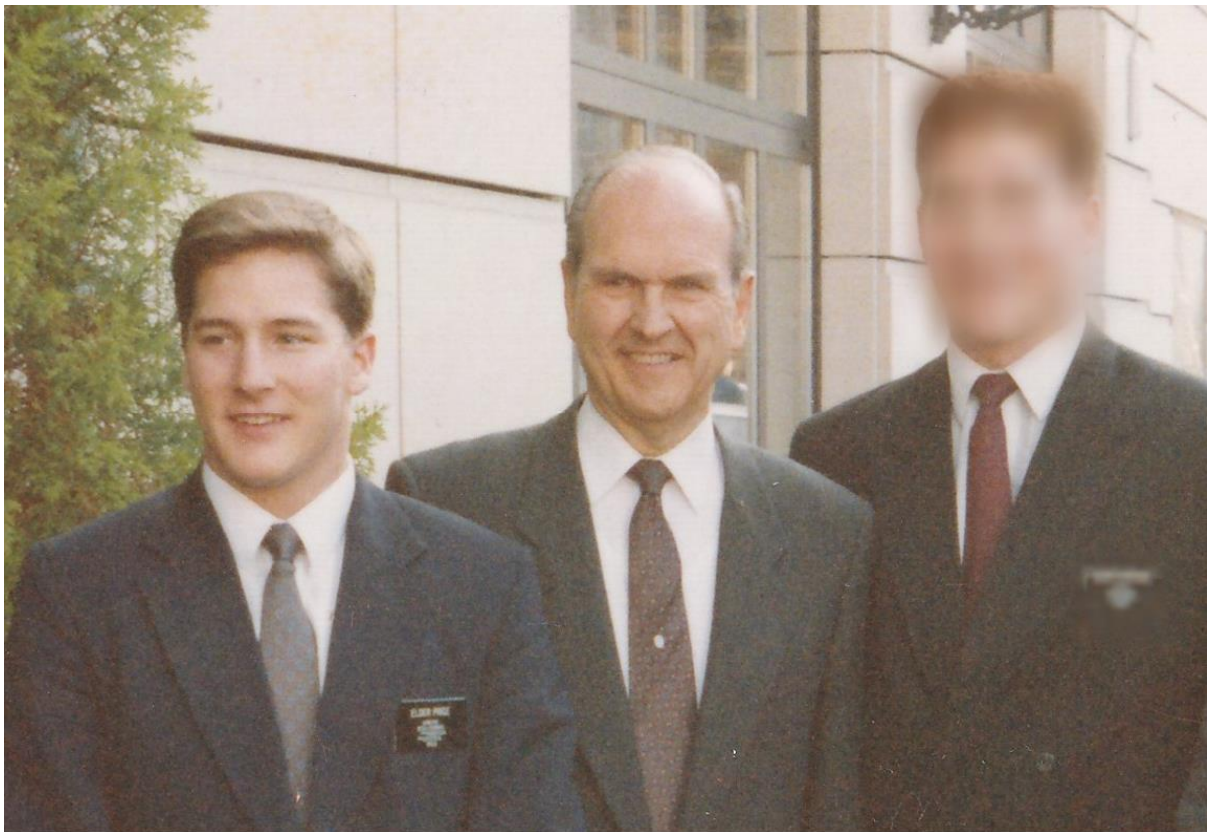
When I met Russell M. Nelson many years ago, I was very impressed with his character, his humility, and his overall demeanor. Nothing about him has ever given me the impression that he is a con-man, a hypocrite, or a power-hungry charlatan of any sort.

Quote after quote from sitting apostles and previous LDS prophets tell us that Joseph Smith is one extreme or the other: he is either second only to Jesus in his character and in his

accomplishments, or he is a complete and utter fraud – as devious and deceitful as they come. I'm not sure whether I can entirely buy into either of those extremes – I guess I'm still looking for that elusive middle ground – but I do hope nobody tries to force me into taking that same sort of *all or nothing* position with Dr. Nelson.

I believe he takes his role as the “Old Ship Zion’s” captain absolutely seriously. His wife, in fact, has said that he wakes up from dreams, grabs a pen and paper, and jots down what he sees as direct revelations intended not just for the body of the church but for the world at large. These visions of his can in a single pen stroke undo decades of concerted marketing efforts – such as with the name of the church – or free up millions of man-hours for Sunday leisure, charity work, or personal study, as in the implementation of the two-hour block. Much as I question the priorities of a Supreme Being that would place these items highest on a divine to-do list, my limited interactions with him lead me to conclude that he actually believes that God is speaking to him – and through him to us.

When I look back at my mission photos with that perspective, I have to wonder whether he was just as clueless about the real meaning of the facsimiles as I was at the time:



*Missionary photo-op with Russell M. Nelson, Dresden, 1991*

“Of course he knows the real meaning,” my Mormon friends might challenge, “What, do you think you’re smarter than him?”

Dr. Nelson is a brilliant man, and I hope I don’t sound patronizing when I say that I wouldn’t claim to possess his intellect, his level of commitment to his career, nor his dedication to his life’s calling; in fact, I owe my own son’s life to procedures that he helped to develop as a surgeon and as a research scientist. I respect him as a man, as a father, as a physician, and as a human being. My disagreement with some of his current opinions doesn’t change that impression.

So why would I be so blunt and apparently condescending as to insinuate that he doesn't actually know the truth behind the Book of Abraham? Well, I'm making that leap precisely because I believe him to be a man of honor and integrity. And I have to believe that if he knew that Hor wasn't Abraham, as the man at the helm of an organization that holds the dissemination of truth as its highest mission, he couldn't possibly allow that false claim to remain in print or to be reproduced and distributed around the world as purported truth.

If, on the other hand, he knows full well that the translations are false and refuses to correct the error, well then it would seem that he is just as culpable as Joseph Smith in making the erroneous claims.

Perhaps I'm missing some sort of reconciliation here – some other explanation that might account for Hor's misidentification? After all, LDS scriptures are full of deliberately withheld mysteries that "ought not to be revealed at this time" or are only given as far as the prophets are permitted to print. In other words, President Nelson and his predecessors may know the real answer, but the missing link is locked away in Cumorah's cave or in the sealed rooms of the church's granite archives or perhaps just beyond the reach of his prophetic vision.

Under that pretext, we're not yet worthy to see the proof, and we need this thresher to separate the wheat from the tares in the meantime. In expressing my concerns to those who have accompanied me on my Mormon journey over the years, I have found that most of those who stand behind the current prophet temporarily take this middle road, accepting two dichotomous views simultaneously: that the translation is in error but that Joseph Smith was right. They believe that someday the whole truth will be revealed, and that they will be blessed for having just believed it in the meantime. At that point it will be too late for the rest of us sign-seekers who flunked the test and will thus writhe away in eternal anguish knowing that we should have just taken the prophet's word for it.

Well, if I am wrong in this case, "Lord help thou mine unbelief!"

I would certainly welcome any other insights that might shed some further light on the subject; but in the meantime, I'm back to my inability to accept divine concealment as the underlying rigging, and I can't see the supposed translations as anything other than an error. I don't know if this choice can be simplified into an either-or statement, but the way I see it, the further propagation of that mistake by the church webmaster and by those in control of the printing presses has to be either deliberate or inadvertent. So which is it?

In referring to a surgeon's choice between breaking bad news to a patient by stating the cold, hard facts versus telling the patient a sugar-coated version of the truth, President Nelson said, "Some truths are best left unsaid." That quote has been used by Dallin Oaks and others to try to justify the omission of uncomfortable, potentially faith-destroying stories that make up a substantial part of Mormon History. In some cases, perhaps the damaging details are irrelevant, and the impulse to bury those facts might be understandable. But when you're speaking of the truth about the real meaning of symbols that are contained in a book of sacred scripture? To me that is a truth that ought to be told...or the symbols ought to be removed. It's one or the other; but leaving admittedly false statements in a book that is going to be handed to my children as truth, and then asking me to ask them, in turn, to suit up, put on a nametag, and proclaim the conviction of that truth to the world? Sorry, I just can't!

## *Impacts*

In the end, to most Mormons, Mormonism is about eternal families, clean living, and a good, honest work ethic. These days, how many Mormons honestly care about the temporarily indecipherable Egyptian hieroglyphics that sparked mysterious speculation in a relatively short-lived, 19<sup>th</sup> century fad? So does any of this really matter? Is the mistranslation actually dangerous or damaging to anyone at all in our world today?

I would say yes, most definitely! This sort of dichotomy separates conviction from truth, prioritizing the act of stating one's adherence to the party line above the actual truth of whatever lies behind that conviction. With the mere fact that the LDS Church puts a book of scripture in missionaries' hands, telling them to testify of its truth, while at the same time acknowledging that it contains blatantly well-known untruths, you effectively grant church members an officially sanctioned certificate to live a double-think life.

On the one hand, we have the statement that "This book is absolutely true." On the other hand, we have the admission that "This part of the book is false." Many people who say the first phrase openly believe the second phrase inwardly. Those two statements cannot both be true at the same time, and trying to accept both simultaneously is the very definition of the term *cognitive dissonance*. Claiming to be able to concurrently walk both sides of the fence is just the beginning of justifying all sorts of other dichotomous ideas and doctrines.

A popular quote that has been included in previously published missionary manuals and paraphrased by Elder Oaks in General Conference states that, "A testimony is to be gained in the bearing thereof." In proper context, I think that statement is intended to mean that if you muster up the courage to open your mouth about your convictions, God's Spirit will help you fill it with the right words to express those actual, inherent beliefs. In practice, however, to many missionaries who first encounter viewpoints that contrast with the standard lessons that their parents have taught them – such as the idea that the facsimiles are fake – it means, "Don't worry whether or not you actually believe this is true, just say it enough times and eventually you will!"

"I *know* the scriptures are true," is a phrase repeated a thousand times over by LDS children, youth, and adults every fast Sunday, often followed by the conviction that "I *know* that Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon." If you took a random Sunday morning poll of those making that claim and asked them if they also believe that Joseph Smith translated the Book of Abraham, I am assuming that a statistically relevant proportion of the respondents would answer *yes*. Their scriptures say so, after all! [At least the older copies did, and many members may not be aware of the subtle changes in wording in the latest printing that begin to open the door to some officially acknowledged uncertainty.]

Without a knowledge of these recent concessions, some unwitting gospel doctrine teacher might even stand up in front of their Sunday school class and testify that they know with every fibre of their being and beyond every shadow of doubt that Joseph Smith indeed translated the Book of Abraham and that God has revealed that fact to them through His Holy Spirit. But what if in that instance the bishop were to intervene, put his arm around the teacher's shoulder and whisper, "Sorry, these symbols in your scriptures weren't actually *translated* per se...I meant to tell you that before you prepared your lesson but just never got around to it...OK, pardon the interruption, but let's back to what you were saying!"

Well, the teacher might be a little surprised – like I was when I first stood in front of my new class as a freshly returned missionary trying to shed light on the subject – to discover that the

interpretations that are called *translations* in the lesson manual are not actually *translations* if your English language is governed by any sort of lexicon.

I'm sorry, but changing the definition of the word *translate* and inserting your alternate reality in place of every dictionary on the planet just doesn't count. By doing that, we open the door for anybody to testify of anything they wish, whether or not they actually believe it under the commonly accepted definition of their words. The underlying caveat is that anything you say can be considered true, so long as the wording is subject to a whole new set of ambiguous meanings:

- "Joseph Smith *saw* God the Father and His Son." OK, but most adherents of that conviction have to redefine "to see" to mean "to perceive through spiritual eyes." Ditto to the Book of Mormon witnesses.
- "I *know* that the Church is true." OK, but what if your actual level of conviction requires you to redefine "know" to mean "have no doubt" or "don't question" – and to redefine the word "true" to mean "a very good thing?" With those substitutions, a whole range of convictions can come across as absolute!
- "Joseph Smith's prospective wives *consented* to his advances." OK, but only if we redefine the word *consent*...

[I'll have to stop with that one, since the definition of consent takes me down a tedious tangent that I'll cover in its own chapter altogether. Among the most important lessons I can teach my daughters and my sons is to have a clear, unambiguous understanding of the meaning of *consent*; Joseph Smith's subjective ambiguity around that subject gets me a bit irate, to say the least, so I'll save that discussion for later and get back to wrapping up the subject of his translation skills...or rather the lack thereof!]

#### *Alternative Essay*

So there you have it; this is my *Tale of two Historicities* – one of which (Abraham's) can be proven wrong, the other of which (Mormon's) I am simply inferring to be non-literal by association with a common source.

My point here is not to dissuade those who have explored the available truth around the issue and have come to the conclusion that these records were divinely dictated; rather, my point is to encourage a more tolerant stance that allows those who have come to the opposite conclusion to both 1) be authentic and 2) feel welcome in the LDS community – instead of having to choose between those two options.

I have no problem with mistakes; I don't expect infallibility from anyone. But continued cover-ups of those mistakes, and stubbornly clinging to your position when caught in a red-handed lie is just absurd. Knowing that the translations are erroneous, you might think that Church leaders would have to concede that fact, perhaps demoting the Book of Abraham – or at least the facsimiles – from its canonized, scriptural repertoire. Instead, the current essay tries to convince readers that heart-warming inclinations should guide their choice, given that there is evidence on both sides of the argument.

I used to believe that there were two sides, each with their own discrepancies; but a little research can easily reveal that there are, in fact, no discrepancies related to the real meaning of the papyri that might indicate any possible ties to Abraham.



“Let me be clear,” as Dr. Ritner prefaces a number of his conclusions on the topic, there is **NO** evidence for its authenticity, not a single shred. That is, unless we start redefining the term *evidence* as has been done with the term *translation*.

In order to lay the issue of historicity to rest in my own head for now, I thought I’d end this chapter with an alternative essay to the one published on the official church website [here](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/translation-and-historicity-of-the-book-of-abraham): <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/translation-and-historicity-of-the-book-of-abraham>. Given the true meaning behind the hieroglyphics – here’s what I wish the 2014 LDS essay on the subject said:

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“We, the brethren, recognize our responsibility to disseminate truth to members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. With that purpose in mind, we acknowledge that the translations of the facsimiles that have been included in previous editions of the Book of Abraham are incorrect; as such, we have decided to remove the facsimiles from the Church website and from future editions of the printed scriptures. In light of these errors, Church members are free to take a literal interpretation of the historicity of Joseph Smith’s translations, or to take a figurative interpretation of their contents as they see fit.

“Our own mothers and fathers taught us that the facsimiles were written by Abraham himself, and frankly, we never questioned them. Now that our grandchildren have access to Google and have informed us of the true translation and origins of the facsimiles, we are obliged to inform the body of the Church of their actual meaning, and we recognize that the previous translations have no place being promoted by our missionaries as scriptural truth.

“We grant all members of the church the freedom to believe or to doubt Joseph Smith’s ability to translate ancient languages without having to be shut out of your kids’ weddings. We welcome you to worship with us in full fellowship and without consequence if you adopt a metaphorical belief in the contents of the Pearl of Great Price, the Book of Mormon, or any other scriptures. No matter what interpretation you accept, please continue to join with us in following our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, and in doing your best to implement His teachings in your interactions and in your service to others.”

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Yes, I understand that the words above would open up the scary middle ground that has previously been banned as no-mans-land – but in which Church leaders have now parked themselves with the current essay. Some, like me, will enter that hostile zone only to realize that Elder Holland was right after all: Trying to classify errors as inspired is as bizarre as a middle ground can possibly get, and when it comes to Joseph Smith’s explanations of the facsimiles, I can make no case for inspiration. Others may find some way to simultaneously accept the true and the false – the yin and the yang – and continue their LDS lives; but I have found that it’s no place for me.

If a statement like this were ever to be issued by the First Presidency, many might fear a mass exodus; but I actually believe that in the long run, telling the real truth – perhaps obliterating the false case for historicity – would slow rather than hasten the exodus that is already occurring.

I also understand full well that a faithful Latter-day Saint doesn’t get to send ark-steadying requests up the chain. With that in mind, feel free to take this substitution to mean whatever you like on the spectrum between heretical opinion and amiable advice – and perhaps pardon the wee bit of sarcasm that has been interlaced just for fun!

So where do we go from here? As time goes on and the hard-liners pass on, I suspect the strict adherence to a literal interpretation of scriptural historicity will gradually change. The transition away from that indefensible position is slow, but steady, and its cumulative effect becomes obvious when observed over decades of time. The manuals for my BYU religion classes include claims that would never be authorized for printing today, serving as an indication of the tremendous shift just in the time since I left Provo in the mid-90s. The ranks of those who believe in “non-objective” plates, as Church Historian B.H. Roberts called them, are likely to grow each year as the trend continues. At some point, Mormons will be free to accept objective or non-objective interpretations of their scriptures without consequence; perhaps it will take many decades or generations, but I would expect a future day when only an orthodox minority will cling to the literal segments, having lost the explicit support of the original cover story by the institution itself.

So can't we just try to speed that process up a bit? Is it really such a scary place to end up? For those who believe the Book of Mormon is historically accurate, there are a thousand internal statements claiming that the whole movement would collapse if it turned out to be inaccurate. I don't believe it; I think the movement will survive just fine with or without tangible plates just as the bulk of Church membership stayed on board when blood atonement and other accepted practices and doctrines were demoted to figurative, mere-mortal hypothesizing.

For those who maintain an absolute conviction in the palpability of the plates, let's try a hypothetical exercise, imagining just for a moment what would happen if the plates “poofed away” into the thin air of nonexistence, taking with them the entire Nephite civilization. If that were the case – if the Book of Mormon turned out to be fictional – how would you fill in the blank in the sentence below:

If there were no Nephites, \_\_\_\_\_ [Fill in the blank] \_\_\_\_\_.

For anyone possessing an unquestioning faith in the existence of the Nephites, that may be a difficult scenario to envision; but Church leaders themselves have answered the question many times over, so adherents ought to be able to at least take that speculative journey in their minds. How many dominoes would you stack up on that blank line? Does the whole enterprise disintegrate in the fission of an all-consuming chain reaction? Or would it get a big “so what?”

LDS prophets and apostles have placed all of their chips on that far-fetched bet, filling in the blank with phrases like, “the Church ought to be harmed,” “Joseph Smith is the greatest fraud the world has ever seen,” “the Church is nothing,” or “both man and book are consigned to Hades.”

Well, I'm sorry, but *there were no Nephites*. You can choose to accept that fact now, or you can wait until the official stance gradually catches up with reality. If it sounds pretentious of me to state that conclusion firmly and objectively, I am merely reciprocating the countering, reverse argument that is proclaimed on a daily basis – with just as much unaltered conviction – thousands of times the world over every time a missionary rings a doorbell.

I'm happy to fill in the blank with any middle ground statement that provides a place for an institution built on a fabrication. I'm open to suggestions as far as the reaction to the stubbornly unfolding truth, even if it's to keep on trucking like the latest inception of the RLDS Church has done; but there simply were no Nephites, so whether it's “who cares” or “the tower is toppled,” whatever phrase filled the blank above can be repeated below as an imperative statement of fact. This road sign can then map the way, the truth, and your life ahead for any Orthomormon who has not yet joined the ranks of the Metamormon movement: \_\_\_\_\_ [Fill in the blank] \_\_\_\_\_!

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Footnote: Selected statements by Dr. Ray Matheny

“While some people choose to make claims for the Book of Mormon through archaeological evidences, to me they are made prematurely, and without sufficient knowledge. I do not support the books written on this subject including *The Messiah in Ancient America*, or any other. I believe that the authors are making cases out of too little evidences and do not adequately address the problems that archaeology and the Book of Mormon present. I would feel terribly embarrassed if anyone sent a copy of any book written on the subject to the National Museum of Natural History – Smithsonian Institution, or other authority, making claims that cannot as yet be substantiated.... there are very severe problems in this field in trying to make correlations with the scriptures. Speculation, such as practiced so far by Mormon authors has not given church members credibility.”

– Ray T. Matheny, Mormon scholar and BYU professor of anthropology, letter dated Dec. 17, 1987

“In my recent reading of the Book of Mormon, I find that iron and steel are mentioned in sufficient context to suggest that there was a ferrous industry here.... You can't refine ore without leaving a bloom of some kind or impurities that blossom out and float to the top of the ore... and also the flux of limestone or whatever is used to flux the material.... [This] blooms off into silicas and indestructible new rock forms. In other words, when you have a ferrous metallurgical industry, you have these evidences of the detritus that is left over. You also have the fuels, you have the furnaces, you have whatever technologies that were there performing these tasks; they leave solid evidences. And they are indestructible things.... No evidence has been found in the new world for a ferrous metallurgical industry dating to pre-Columbian times. And so this is a king-size kind of problem, it seems to me, for the so-called Book of Mormon archaeology. This evidence is absent.”

– Ray Matheny, Speech at Sunstone Symposium 6, "Book of Mormon Archaeology," August 25, 1984

“And I have real difficulty in trying to relate these cultural concepts as I've briefly discussed here with archeological findings that I'm aware of.....If I were doing this cold like John Carlson is here, I would say in evaluating the Book of Mormon that it had no place in the New World whatsoever. I would have to look for the place of the Book of Mormon events to have taken place in the Old World. It just doesn't seem to fit anything that he has been taught in his discipline, nor I in my discipline in anthropology, history; there seems to be no place for it. It seems misplaced. It seems like there are anachronisms. It seems like the items are out of time and place, and trying to put them into the New World. And I think there's a great difficulty here for we Mormons in understanding what this book is all about.” – "Book of Mormon Archeology," Response by Professor Ray Matheny, Sunstone Symposium, August 25, 1984

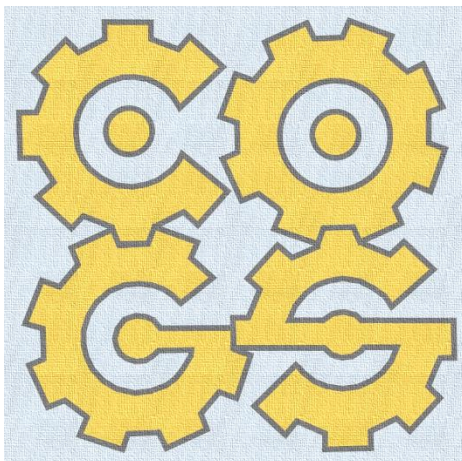
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## Chapter 2: Age of Accountability

### My Analogy: Children of Grievous Sinners

“18 is the new 8!”

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[Scene 1: Gary, Indiana. Bishop’s office, LDS meetinghouse, February 2018. Bishop Robinson, a middle-aged man who has served the church selflessly since the day he was baptized as an eight-year-old, is meeting with an energetic and well-spoken girl named Breslen Simmons, who is about to turn eight herself. Her proud parents slide their chairs back to show Breslen that she is the center of attention here. Bishop Robinson takes off his reading glasses and leans back in his chair]

Bishop: Hi Breslen – you look so pretty in your new dress!

Breslen: Thank you Bishop.

Bishop: I’ve never seen a dress with a gear logo – must be a new brand name I’ve never heard of.

Breslen: Nope, it’s not a designer brand – Mierren and I actually drew the logos ourselves!

Bishop: Yes, I know Mierren, she’s a very...um...interesting girl.

Breslen: Well we’re best friends – and we’re going to draw them onto all of our dresses.

Bishop: OK, well that’s all very intriguing. But let’s get to the point. So you want to be baptized?

Breslen: Yep, I really do!

Bishop: Great! As I mentioned to you last week, the bishop always holds a baptismal interview with those who want to be baptized. It’s one of my favorite parts of my role as bishop. Are you ready?

Breslen: I sure am! At least I think so...as long as the questions aren’t too hard!

Bishop: Well, I’m sure you’ll do fine. So here we go: As you know, baptism represents a big, lifelong commitment – it’s a lot of responsibility for an eight-year-old! So I want to make sure you really know what you’re getting yourself into, and I also want to answer any questions you might have. So my first question back to you is this: Why do you want to be baptized?

Breslen: Because Jesus did it as an example, and so that we can repent.

Bishop: You've learned your primary lessons very well, but of course given your age I don't think you'd have much of anything to repent of.

Breslen: [laughing] Well I hope nothing too serious!

Bishop: I'm sure you're fine. So what baptismal date are you thinking about?

Breslen: On my birthday, the fifth of March.

Bishop [looking at a calendar on his wall]: Well that's a Monday; you should be having your Family Home Evening that night. Can we shoot for the weekend?

Breslen [handing the bishop her own calendar]: Actually March 5 is a Sunday. See?

Bishop: OK, but this is a calendar from 2028.

Breslen: That's right, Bishop.

Bishop: But that's 10 years away – you'll be 18!

Breslen: Yep, that's when I'd like to be baptized.

Bishop: Wow; that would be a long time to wait! We might want to talk about the Gift of the Holy Ghost. Do you know what that is?

Breslen: Yep, it's what helps you know what's right and what's wrong.

Bishop: Exactly. Without it, how else will you be able to deal with all of the tough decisions you're going to have to face as you grow up?

Breslen. Well, I guess I'm having trouble understanding that too. But Mierren really wanted the Gift of the Holy Ghost too, and she was told she has to wait until she's 18 to get it.

Bishop: Well, Mierren's in a different situation than you are.

Breslen: Yes, I know; she said you told her not to come back to church at all until after she's 18.

Bishop: Well, that's not exactly how I put it.

Breslen: But she showed me the talk you printed out for her, and it said primary isn't the best place for her – she said she won't even be able to go to Young Womens when she's older. By the time she's allowed to go, she'll be an adult and will have to join the belief society!

Bishop: [chuckling] That's RElief Society, Breslen.

Breslen: Ok, sorry, but I saw one of their meetings through the window once and it looked really, really boring.

Bishop: Well, I know that sounds a little harsh right now, but you never know, things might change in the meantime.

Breslen: But the talk came from an apostle, and he said the prophet got a belevation right from God that she shouldn't be going to primary – do you think God will change His mind soon?

Bishop: Well REVelations aren't something we can all understand, so that's a really hard question to answer; you just need to understand that things are very confusing for Mierren right now.

Breslen: They sure are, but Sister Robinson taught us in primary that when people are confused they just need to *Follow the Prophet* like it says in the song. She said if the prophet says something, then it's the same thing as if Jesus said it right to my face with his own lips. So does Jesus think Mierren shouldn't go to primary either?

Bishop: I – uh – I really don't know; we'll just have to sort things out with her separately. Remember, we're here to talk about you right now.

Breslen: Well, I guess I should be confused too then, because I think Mierren and I are pretty much the same – we're such good friends, sometimes we think maybe should have been twins!

Bishop: No, no, no...you're in a completely different situation.

Breslen: Is it because of what the apostle said about her parents?

Bishop: What was that?

Breslen: That they are guilty of really, really grievous sins? I'm not sure what *grievous* means...

Bishop: I think you mean *grievous*...

Breslen: Oh, well that sounds really bad! General Grievous always scared me when I was little, so –

Bishop: *[interrupting]* I hope you understand that I can't talk to you about her parents.

Breslen: OK, I guess that's fine, but it makes me sad not to have her there in primary.

Bishop: We're all sad about it too.

Breslen: Yes, I know. My mom was helping Sister Robinson last week, and she had to fix up all of the name tags on the classroom doors. She didn't see me, but I could tell she was crying when she took down Mierren's name. I know it was hard for her, but she obeyed anyway.

Bishop: She's a good example to you, isn't she?

Breslen: Well, when I saw her take the name tag down, I took mine off too. I decided that I want to spend my Sunday mornings at Mierren's house singing our favourite primary songs together so she won't have to be alone. Then we can both come back together – when we're 18!

Bishop: But that would make your parents and your teachers very sad. Think of what you'll be missing!

Breslen: I did think of that – which is why I was so happy when the apostle said she would be ok.

Bishop: He said that?

Breslen: I think so. He said if we wait until we're 18 to start coming to church we wouldn't lose anything.

Bishop: But Breslen, think about how you'll miss out on primary, youth conference, temple trips...

Breslen: I don't know how we would get that back, but that's what he said, and Sister Robinson said an apostle is a prophet too. So he must know what he's talking about – especially if he can talk for Jesus!

Bishop: But it wouldn't be the same for you.

Breslen: Why not? My parents are sinners too.

Bishop: No, no, no! Your parents aren't guilty of nearly the same level of sin as Mierren's parents.

Breslen: What did they do that was so bad?

Bishop: Well just so we can move on, I'll let you know that we told her mom not marry her partner, and they directly disobeyed us by doing it anyway. That's called apostasy!

Breslen: But Mierren didn't do anything wrong!

Bishop: That may be true, but she lives with them, so she would be really confused – like the apostle said, she would learn one thing in primary and something different at home. We really wouldn't want her to have to live with such a tough conflict.

Breslen: Well sometimes I get confused too – my dad went through the drive-through after church last Sunday, but my primary teacher said that's a sin.

Bishop: You don't have to worry about that sort of thing, Breslen; besides, I know your dad, and he's a good, faithful priesthood holder.

Breslen: Well I might get in trouble for saying this, but we were at the mall the other day, and I looked over at dad while we passed the lacy underwear store. *[whispering]* I saw him look over at the posters. We learned from Sister Johnson in primary that Jesus said if you look at girls in their underwear it's called adulterizing or something like that. Is that something serious?

Bishop: *[clearing his throat]* Well, maybe he should just look away next time.

Breslen: But what about the other girls in my primary class? Paula's dad is always up there talking about himself in testimony meeting. He goes on and on. Sister Johnson said it's called "pride" when someone just loves to hear themselves talk. And Jesus said pride is a really bad sin.

Bishop: Well I guess that's true, but it's not really on the same scale.

Breslen: My grandpa said when he was a missionary in Germany he baptized people whose parents were Nazis. We saw a movie about that in school once, and they must have done some pretty grievous things.

Bishop: I can't really say...

Breslen: And Julie's dad comes to that group here on Tuesdays where everyone's addicted to something – are they sinners?

Bishop: No, no, they're trying to fix things.

Breslen: Audrey told me her dad hits her when she's bad...and I heard Brittany's dad molested her cousin. What does mol –

Bishop *[getting agitated]*: I'm sorry, the things they share with me are confidential, so I can't really say anything about that.

Breslen: Oh, and Holly lives with her mom 'cause her stepdad's in jail – something about a gang.

Bishop: Ok, I think that's enough examples.

Breslen: But their kids all get to come to primary – why is Mierren so different?

Bishop: Because the prophet said so, that's why. Don't you remember your primary songs?

Breslen: I guess so. Maybe it will get easier to say my testimony about him out loud when I get old like you...

Bishop: I'm not that...

Breslen: Sorry, I mean older. But it must be easier for you 'cause my dad said you posted your support for the policy on your Facebook page right away.

Bishop: That's right, I follow the prophet 100%. Sometimes you just have to trust him, even if things don't make sense.

Breslen: Even if you have to tell a kid like Mierren she's not welcome here?

Bishop: Well I wouldn't say it like that.

Breslen: But that's what she told me she heard. Can't a prophet make a mistake sometimes?

Bishop: Not this time, I'm afraid.

Breslen: But I really don't get it. My Mom told me one of her friends in school back in Utah had three moms – that's even more than Mierren – and she said kids would call her and her brother plygs.

Bishop: Well that's something completely different.

Breslen: Maybe so, but Mom told us we should always stand up for someone if they're getting called names. I don't know what a plyg is but it sounds like pig so I don't think it's very nice.

Bishop: You're right about that.

Breslen: Well, when Mierren found out she won't be able to come to church anymore, the other kids were teasing her because Emma's brother told her the policy is good riddance – because it only affects children of really bad sinners – grievous ones, whatever that is.

Bishop: Let's just say serious instead, ok?

Breslen: OK, but Sister Johnson had written "I am a child of God" after everyone's name on the white board last week. And before she came into the classroom, Emma crossed out "Child of God" and wrote "Child of Grievous Sinners" after Mierren's name.

Bishop: Well that's not very nice!

Breslen: But then the boys decided to shorten it up to C.O.G.S. so Sister Johnson wouldn't know what we were laughing about – and so they wouldn't get in trouble.

Bishop: I'll have to talk to them about that in our next interview.

Breslen: Well Mierren and I were talking, and we decided that we're all COGS; I'd never want to let her down, so I wrote it next to my name too so she wouldn't feel alone.

Bishop: I see; well I'm sure your mom is proud of you for being brave enough to stand up for her.

Breslen: When we learned about bullying in school, my teacher said if someone is making fun of you for something, sometimes it's better to go along with it than to get all upset about it. That's what they want after all – to make you upset.

Bishop: I guess that makes sense.

Breslen: Well, Mierren and I decided not to get upset and have some fun with it instead. So we erased the word COGS and drew a gear with cogs next to our names so that everyone would know that we're the same.

Bishop: I guess that explains your dress, then.

Breslen: Yep, when we were playing at her house, we found some special fabric pens and decided to draw them on our dresses – and we're proud to wear them together.

Bishop: Listen, our time is up, but I'm proud of you for sharing your thoughts and questions me. It doesn't sound like we'll be able to finish this tonight; so maybe the best thing to do is for you to go home and pray about it before you make a final decision.

Breslen: [standing] OK, I can do that.

Bishop: Great! I hope you get a good feeling about it, but we'll still have to do some paperwork. Here is the form you'll need for your certificate if you get a warm answer to your prayer. All I need is your parents' signature and we can schedule it.

Breslen: Thanks Bishop!

[After hugs and handshakes, everyone leaves the meetinghouse to travel home.]

[Scene 2: Simmons family dinner table.]

Breslen: So, dad, did I do good in the interview?

Brother Simmons: Yes, I was very proud of you.

Breslen: Well I've thought it through and I think the bishop is right. I should just go ahead and get baptized. Like the Bishop said, though, he can't schedule it until you sign this form saying you're ok letting me get baptized.

Brother Simmons: Well, you've given me some things to think about.

Breslen: OK, but I prayed about it and it felt really good when I thought about wearing my special baptism dress that mom made for me. So I've made up my mind. Here's a pen.

Brother Simmons: [*reluctantly taking the pen from Breslen*] Like I said, maybe we should talk it through a little more first.

Breslen: Come on dad, just do it!

Brother Simmons: _____ [Fill in the blank] _____.

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OK, so that's the end of this play. And again, this is another "choose your own ending" story. There are only a few characters to choose from in this one, but if Nathan told you, "you are that dad!" how would you finish this story? Would you:

- Sign it and forget about Mierren. [Tell Breslen, "You can't let a rule that doesn't directly affect you hinder your own progress."]
- Refuse to sign it. [Tell Breslen, "I'm going to take a stand and ask you to wait to be baptized until Mierren can be baptized, too."]
- Stall until you figure out where you stand. [If you wait long enough, the policy might change. Then you can say, "I never agreed with that policy to begin with, but I didn't want to cause a stir at the time."]

As Dr. Seuss asks:

*"What would you do?  
What would you do,  
if your [daughter] asked you?"*

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My Reality: Uninvited

"I'll walk with you. I'll talk with you. That's how I'll show my love for you." – Carol Pearson

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My wife called me at work on November 5, 2015 and said that she had just read a social media post claiming that the LDS Church had adopted a new policy barring children of same-sex couples from church membership.

"No way!" I said, "They wouldn't do that."

"Are you sure?" she asked.

"Absolutely!" I said, "It's probably just been posted by somebody who wants to tear down the church by spouting off exaggerations. Besides, it would be a PR disaster – it'd set things back a hundred years!"

I was trying to get some reports out the door and didn't have time to confirm anything online, but on my way home I kept running through memories of some of the youth we had taught and baptized as missionaries. Every situation was unique, but as long as the parents gave permission – even those whose beliefs and lifestyles differed substantially from LDS policies and practices – their children were welcome to be baptized. They couldn't possibly...

When I got home and looked into it in more detail, I found that the commotion was based on an excerpt that had been pulled from a leaked, internal document.

"See," I told my wife, "This didn't even come from the church. Some anti-Mormon is just trying to ruffle feathers by pulling this out of context. I'm sure there's more to the actual story."

Later that night, though, I had to eat my words on all counts when LDS Church spokesman Eric Hawkins confirmed to the press that the leaked policy was accurate. The details weren't explained, but he said further clarification was coming.

For the next 24 hours, my mind was spinning with the implications. It was clear that the LDS Church would no longer baptize children "trapped" in the targeted households – and that the parents would be excommunicated if they got married under new laws allowing same-sex unions – but what would happen to those children who were already members? Would they be excommunicated as well? Would the change be implemented on paper only – with everyone still welcome to attend meetings, just as the sign outside every LDS chapel attests? Or would those affected by this policy change be asked to leave?

I was serving as a member of an LDS bishopric at the time. My assigned responsibilities as the bishop's executive secretary and ward clerk included recording the outcomes of disciplinary councils and updating membership records with any changes. Would I be asked to remove people from church rolls to implement this policy?

I watched Facebook explode with inflammatory opinions. Some of my friends posted their unwavering support for the Mormon prophet – thereby confirming their tacit support for the policy as well. Others spouted off their disapproval with responses that ranged from obscenities to mere disappointment that really just masked their reluctant, priesthood-ban-style support. My initial gut reaction was to go on a social media rampage and voice my opinion countering the policy as so many others were doing, but I understood the long-term consequences of a kneejerk reaction – Facebook is forever as they say – and decided to let things simmer while waiting for further clarification.

For those who immediately posted their support for the policy, I wasn't sure they really understood what it might take to enforce this sort of mandate. As for myself, I pictured the primary wing of our meetinghouse, where laminated nametags are attached to each of the classroom doors. The name tags are decorated with images that are special to each class member. On Sunday mornings each child takes the Velcro nametag off the door and attaches it to the board inside to confirm their presence in the class. The prayers offered at the beginning and end of each Sunday school lesson usually include the hope that those whose names are still on the outside of the door might be able to attend next week.

I imagined what it would feel like to permanently remove one of the names from the door – potentially against the wishes of the child. If this policy were to be implemented in full effect, someone would have the job of taking that tag down. Would I be willing to do that? Would I willingly strike their baptism from the record if it came to that? If so, would I do it reluctantly and then rant about my conflicted thoughts on Facebook? Or would I just plain refuse?

I couldn't imagine being part of that sort of crackdown and made the silent decision that if I was asked to remove a name from the church records, I would simply refuse to do so and leave the paperwork to someone else. And I certainly wouldn't ask anyone to leave. Although I struggled with the decision initially – Mormons are raised to follow orders, after all – in the end it felt liberating to at least take that stance internally.

The LDS Church promised further clarification, though, so I decided to just wait for the updates before voicing my feelings on the matter. Given the overwhelmingly negative public reaction – and my own nausea at the thought of this policy being adopted – I hoped the official statement might include some sort of relaxation of the terms and conditions. I stayed in denial with this hope until Elder Christofferson's interview was posted the next day.

I came away from the so-called "clarification" even more confused. I guess I was relieved to hear that those who had already been blessed or baptized would be allowed to retain their membership status – so I wouldn't be asked to remove kids from church rolls – but on the flip side, he had also confirmed one of my other fears: They weren't just saying these kids should be kept off the paper records – which most children would never actually see anyway – children were being told that they wouldn't be welcome in primary or youth organizations at all. Their attendance was "not going to be an appropriate thing" given that their parents were guilty of a "particularly grievous" kind of sin.

I was shocked – absolutely stunned!

My eight-year old daughter was asking to be baptized herself, so the timing of this announcement sent my mind spinning with questions. If she decided to go ahead with it, I would be asked for my consent. Could I really sign that paper knowing that some kids are being excluded from membership? If my daughter had friends who might be affected by this policy, would I expect her to stand with them? Should she voice any concerns in her baptismal interview with the bishop?

Here is how an LDS [baptismal interview](#) is supposed to go:

**Jacob's Baptism Interview**

By Angela Westover Hunter  
(Based on a true story)

"He that is baptized in my name, to him will the Father give the Holy Ghost" (2 Nephi 31:12).

**"OK, Mom,** I'm ready to go to my interview," Jacob said, walking out of his room. He wore his church shirt, nice pants, and his tie knotted backward.

"Did you do your tie by yourself?" Mom asked.

"Yeah, I found the instructions in the back of my Cub Scout book. But it doesn't look quite right."

Mom knelt down and helped Jacob turn his tie around, then gave him a hug.

"Mom, why do I need an interview before I get baptized?" Jacob asked as they drove to the church.

"Well, part of the bishop's job is to make sure you're getting baptized for the right reasons, not just because you turn eight or your friends are getting baptized."

When they got to the church, Jacob jumped out of the car, ran inside, and sat down to wait in the foyer. In a few minutes Bishop Simmons came out of his office.

"Hey, Jacob. Looks like it's your turn." Bishop Simmons shook Jacob's hand and led him into the office. "Nice tie."

Jacob smiled and sat down across from the bishop.

"So, Jacob, you're getting ready to be baptized."

"Yup! I can't wait!"

Bishop Simmons grinned. "Glad to hear it. It's an important step to get back to Heavenly Father. So let's talk about why you want to become a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints."

"Well, I like that we have a living prophet and the Book of Mormon," Jacob answered. "We talked about it at home, and I prayed about it too."

"How did you feel when you prayed about it?"

Jacob twisted his tie around his finger. "It felt right. I want to get baptized like Jesus."

Bishop Simmons pointed at the picture of Jesus on his wall. "Jesus is our very best example. Tell me about when He was baptized."

Jacob's feet swung as he talked. "Jesus asked John the Baptist to baptize Him. They went to the River Jordan, and Jesus went all the way under the water. That's called immersion. Jesus made Heavenly Father happy, and I want to be like Jesus."

"I can tell you've been learning a lot about this. Have you learned what happens when you're baptized?"

"Yup, I'll be a member of the Church. And when I'm confirmed, I'll get the gift of the Holy Ghost."

Bishop Simmons nodded. "The Holy Ghost will help you your whole life. And whenever you do something wrong, you can repent and the Holy Ghost can help you do better."

Jacob smiled. "Mom says the Holy Ghost is the best gift I'll get this year."

Bishop Simmons and Jacob talked for a few more minutes about Joseph Smith, the Book of Mormon, and choosing the right.

"Jacob, I think you're ready to be baptized," Bishop Simmons said as he stood up and shook Jacob's hand. "Congratulations."

Jacob ran out of the office grinning. "Mom, I'm ready!"

The author lives in Utah, USA.

➔ We can be baptized because the priesthood was restored! Turn to page 44 to learn more. ➔

**"We covenant to take Christ's name upon us . . . and serve Him to the end."**  
Sister Constance M. Stephens,  
First Counselor in the Relief Society  
General Presidency  
The Holy Family Relief Society Temple, Provo, Utah, 2013, 12.

22 Friend May 2015 23

It should be that simple...if only it were the case. The preceding, hypothetical baptismal interview with Breslen popped into my head as an alternative, analogous dialogue while I debated my own stance on the issue and wondered what I should do – and what I should encourage my daughter to do. In addition to my record-keeping assignments, I was also serving as the primary pianist at the time, and as I would run through the songs for the week, I kept getting stuck on the pages that focused on baptism, especially those that were accompanied by pastel drawings of a devout daddy baptizing his little girl - as I had always assumed it was supposed to be. After mulling it over for a few restless nights, I finally found my own answer within the lyrics to the LDS Primary song "I'll walk with you":

*If you don't walk as most people do,  
Some people walk away from you,  
But I won't! I won't!*

*If you don't talk as most people do,  
Some people talk and laugh at you,  
But I won't! I won't!*

*I'll walk with you. I'll talk with you.  
That's how I'll show my love for you.  
Jesus walked away from none.  
He gave his love to ev'ryone.  
So I will! I will!*

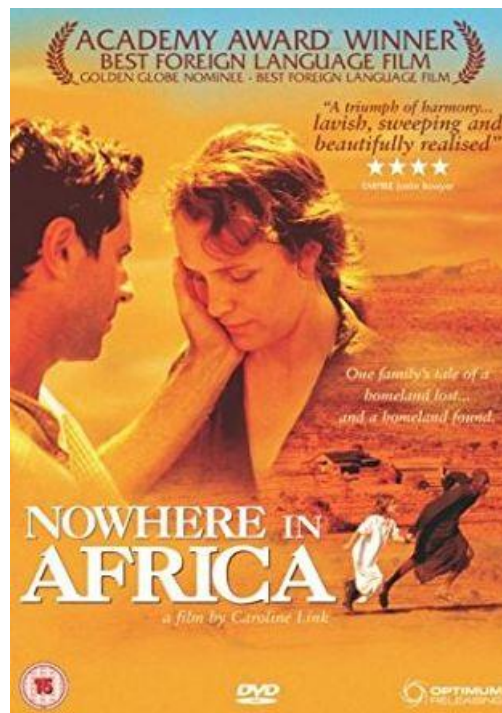
*Jesus blessed all he could see,  
Then turned and said, "Come, follow me."  
And I will! I will!*

*I will! I will!*

*I'll walk with you. I'll talk with you.  
That's how I'll show my love for you.*

My adopted grandmother in Germany – who was our landlady at the time – used to tell stories about her best friend, Steffi, who was asked one day not to return to her German school because it wasn't the best place for a Jew to be. In the end, none of her classmates stood up for her. Sixty years later, Oma Gasteiger was still traumatized as she related her feeble attempts to compensate for her earlier silence by sneaking over to the railway lines outside her Silesian village and tossing pieces of bread up to the doomed hands reaching through the slots in the boxcars.

Remembering Steffi's story [which, by the way, won the 2002 Oscar for best foreign film] helped me make the decision not to consent to the baptism of any of my children while this discriminatory policy is in place. Should it remain in place until they turn 18, I resolved that they could make their own decision at that point. I could take comfort in the belief that there's nothing to fear, because as they've been promised, "nothing will be lost to them." Of course, if the policy is still in place, consenting to their own baptism at that point would effectively constitute their disavowment of my own disavowment of the discrimination – but perhaps they'll get to experience a bit of empathy through that process since the targets of this policy are expected to do the same to their own parents!



Steffi's story conveys a message that combats intolerance based on both race and religion; these days it's relatively easy to claim support for that message. After racial limitations were officially lifted in the LDS church in 1978, many church members claimed that they had never supported the discriminatory policies to begin with. But if they never voiced any opposition to the now disavowed practices while they were in place, their after-the-fact argument should understandably be met with reserved scepticism.

I don't want to find myself in that same boat when my children ask me where I stood during my own life. I would expect the church policy regarding children of same-sex parents to change at some point in the future. If or when that happens, I would prefer to have already publicly expressed my opposition to it rather than having to defend my previous silence.

I originally wrote the little play about Breslen back in 2015 – with the intention of demonstrating my stance on the issue to my own kids. But when then-apostle Russell M. Nelson said

that he had it direct from the prophet that the policy was the “mind and will of the Lord,” I backed off, wondering if I had misunderstood some reasoning that might come to light in the future. Or maybe I was just afraid to be labeled a heretic...whatever the case, I kept my mouth shut.

The official response was that this policy was implemented out of love – that it arose from concern about the potential conflict these children would experience between what they learn at home and what they learn at church.

*“We don't want the child to have to deal with issues that might arise where the parents feel one way and the expectations of the Church are very different.”*

We're talking about kids whose parents aren't members. If they were members before, the implementation of this new policy ensures their excommunication. So we're talking exclusively about children of non-Mormons. So let's have a look at other minors who want to join the church without their parents being members. Who are these kids, and why aren't we concerned about the discrepancy between what they learn in church and what they learn at home?

Look around the world at how many teenagers get introduced to the LDS Church because they want to learn English or play basketball with the missionaries. They are all invited to be baptized if they can get their parents' permission. Some parents, even if they don't believe the Mormon message themselves, give their children permission to join the church. Most of them probably hope the Mormon Church will teach their kids good values.

But if the parents themselves don't believe that Joseph Smith was a prophet, they must believe he was a fraud, a con-man, a false prophet, a mental case, or whatever else a non-believer would classify him to be. So when these kids come to church, they will learn that Joseph Smith was a true prophet; and when they go home, they know that their parents feel otherwise.

But you know what? We trust these kids to sort it out! We trust that they'll be ok hearing one thing at church and something different at home.

Would it make any sense to try to keep these kids away from church meetings and activities – under the guise of protecting them from these dichotomous beliefs – and then force them to wait until they turn 18 to make the decision, asking them to disavow their parents' conviction that Joseph Smith wasn't who he said he was before consenting to their baptism?

If anything, wouldn't it be most prudent to stop baptizing any minors at all into the Church if their parents aren't members – rather than singling out a particular group by trying to prioritize the “grievousness” of their parents' sins? Even a parent's church membership, of course, doesn't guarantee that the lessons learned in primary and family home evening will match; so given that all minors have to face this internal conflict, why not raise the age of accountability to 18 for everybody? Can't we just welcome the whole lot to church and leave the paperwork for later? Besides, as Elder Christofferson said in his November 2015 interview clarifying the new policy, “Nothing will be lost” to those who wait until they reach adulthood before making their own life-long decision.

Substitute in whatever obscenity or term you're comfortable with here, but I'm calling [the bluff]. Sparing the kids the inner conflict is not the reason. There must be another underlying motive, whether it's vindictive or political or springing from some other source that I couldn't possibly begin to guess. From what I've gathered, some Mormons who silently and reluctantly support this policy feel that it is a trial of faith meant to test our trust in God's mysterious ways – believing that the true

meaning inspired by love will be revealed in the future; if that's the case, I guess I'm just going to have to flunk this particular test.

This is not without precedent; for years I trusted that there was some reason why the LDS Church promoted racist doctrines and practices in the past. Whether in this life or in the next, I thought some reason might come to light that would excuse those who kept silent with their opposition to discrimination over all those years. But then on December 6, 2013, the church answered all of the questions in an online essay that ended the mystery. As it turns out...they were just plain wrong. By the Church's own admission, those who had promoted racist principles over the years were simply swayed by the culture and prejudices of the day. [Except, of course, those who implemented the ban in the first place under God's own purported direction!] I certainly wish they had gone one step further in admitting that not just the reasons for the ban, but the ban itself had nothing to do with God. But at least we have the concession that even those discriminatory things that were spoken from the pulpit as the *mind and will of the Lord* are now thankfully disavowed by the modern church.

I hope this time around it doesn't take over a century, but I'm going to bank on a similar, officially sanctioned, future interpretation of the discriminatory 2015 policies – hopefully also disavowing the claims of divine direction for its implementation in the first place!

Mormons believe that a loving God can only speak to the world through a single man – in 2015 that man was Thomas S. Monson. During that year, I can't think of any other decree issued from Salt Lake City that had the specific seal of approval as being the "mind and will of the Lord." So of all the perils from which the creator of the universe wishes to protect his creations, of all the global fears we face, of all the warnings to be proclaimed to the world through divine intervention – the greatest threat to humanity, to morality, to the planet itself...is this? That some child who wants to attend primary with the full support of their parents needs to be excluded because God can't stand the thought of that child being exposed to the inner conflict that arises when their primary teachers object to same-sex marriage while their parents support it? That's THE most important thing? Of all the kids in vulnerable, abusive, horrid situations around the planet, that's the one thing that is singled out as God's highest priority? Seriously?

I'm sorry, I can't. I just can't.



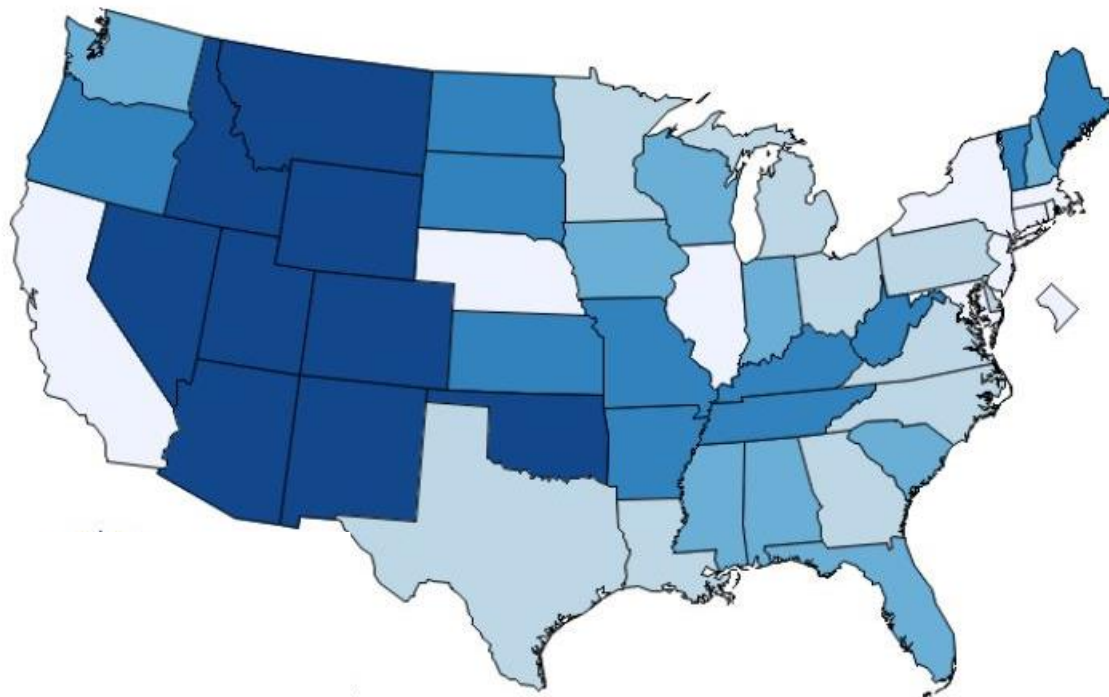
Maybe it's ironic, but I don't think I could put it any better than the primary song that was quoted above: "I won't, I won't!"



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Armed with the underlying mantra of those lyrics, I have felt comfortable over the years applying it in our own home with the postponement of Breslen’s baptism. Friends and family kept asking about her big day, so initially this was a bit awkward; after all, Mormon doctrine states in God’s own words that if your child is still unbaptized on their ninth birthday, the sin drops straight onto your own head as the parent. By that time, though, the threat of carrying that burden on my shoulders had lost any impact, and I felt completely justified sharing my stance in private. But the op-ed statements that I wrote for the Salt Lake papers or for social media posts – including this very write-up here – have just sat on my computer in the *unsent* folder year after year. Being too chickenshit to wear the scarlet “A” for *Apostate* that would accompany a statement that directly contrasted the “mind and will of the Lord,” I encapsulated my weak dissent into Breslen’s stalled baptism and held my tongue in public – that is, until I happened to run across a map that caught my attention.

I make maps. That’s what I do. Mapmaking essentially pays the bills in our house. In my line of work, I often have to color-code the maps to show flood hazard ratings, levee alignments, or a number of other variables. One thing that drives me crazy in my work is when I see a map without a legend, which can leave you guessing as to its meaning. Here’s an example of a map with a missing legend:



If you were on a game show with a million dollars at stake, and you had to guess at this map’s context, what would you choose? The map leaves no question as to a geographic trend, but given that the darkest coding includes Utah, every single state that borders Utah, and two other states that border states that border Utah, would you assume it has something to do with religion?

If so, your million dollars would evaporate. In reality, it’s a CDC map published by the federal health authorities. The colors show the relative U.S. suicide rates from 2009-2014. It might look suspiciously like a map of Mormonism, but it doesn’t actually have anything at all to do with religion.

Looking at this particular map, as for me, I'm unable to dismiss the seeming association between Mormonism and mental health without closer examination. Could there possibly be a link between the two? I like to avoid collective guilt by association wherever possible, so it does feel a bit relieving to consider that a map of average elevation by state might show similar color bands, potentially pointing any blame for causality elsewhere. You can, in fact, find YouTube videos by Mormon apologists claiming that there is no statistical correlation whatsoever between Mormonism and suicide, leaving geographic or environmental factors such as altitude, latitude, temperature, oxygen, air pressure, solar radiation, or other hypotheses to substitute for any religious or cultural links apparent in the statistics, not to mention the rate of gun ownership!

Everyone is of course free to reach their own conclusions on the matter, but my own armchair research indicates that if you start tracking anti-depressant usage, attempted suicides, or a number of other parameter, you can begin to build a convincing case that draws Mormon culture back into the mix, particularly if you start focusing the results based on age, sexual orientation, or other filters. Is it just coincidence that proximity to Salt Lake City begins to look like a causal factor for mental health challenges that seem to be increasing over time? Some of the more vocal mental health and suicide awareness groups have issued challenges in the press and on social media claiming that LDS policies and attitudes are linked to higher rates of depression and suicide, particularly among young LGBTIQ+ members of the church who struggle with the Church's pervasive position on sexual orientation; I assume those at the helm of the LDS Church are aware of these claims, whether or not there is any recognition of responsibility. In any case, a great deal of effort has gone into trying to promote awareness of the problems to church leaders.

I don't know if any LDS leader would ever have seen the 2014 map above; if so, would it have sparked some introspection about the root causes and what – if anything – to do about it? Would a glance at the map have prompted a humble prayer for further guidance and direction? Even if elevation ended up being the primary contributing factor – as the apologists insist – would some additional concern for the Church's constituents be warranted given the mile-high contours surrounding the Mountain of the Lord?

I certainly don't know the answer, and I do recognize that an issue as complex as suicide obviously doesn't have a single answer. I mean look at Oklahoma, for instance. It doesn't show up on any leader board for elevation or for Mormonism. It's flat as a mat, and a religion practiced by one percent of a state's population is not going to turn that entire state dark blue!

So I understand those who don't think it's fair to point fingers at an institution that may or may not share any culpability in the matter. But I do think it's worth asking the question. And I do know that in 2015, the Mormon Prophet – seeking further light and knowledge of his own – claimed to have received a directive straight from God Himself which was then written into the handbook of instructions for ecclesiastical leaders. The Church spokesman then stated for the press that the new policy originated out of love – in this case the Brethren's love for children who happened to find themselves in the homes of same-sex couples.

How might God's mouthpiece on earth best convey his love for these children? With Christ Himself at the wheel of the vessel, what policy could the "only true and living" church on earth adopt to spread Christ's love in these troubled times? The answer is now written into history as the *November Policy* that – shockingly – bars affected children from church ordinances and encourages them to stay away from primary and youth meetings as an "inappropriate place for them to be."

I would issue the following challenge to believing Mormons, particularly to my own Facebook friends who immediately posted “I stand with the prophet” memes when the policy was issued: Do you really believe that this policy sprang from love as is claimed? To me, that claim implies that the prophet was devoutly praying, “Lord, I love these children; please let me know how we as your church body can best demonstrate our love for them.” To which he then received a revelation that was presented to his humble apostolic quorum and was then etched into the handbook as if from God’s Holy finger. Perhaps that sounds a bit satirical or exaggerated, but this particular policy came with the stated seal of approval as being literally the “mind and will of the Lord” and was supposedly issued by the same God who spoke to Moses, to a man holding the same prophetic role held by Moses himself — so why should this divine edict be treated any differently than the story of the stone tablets?

If you had to bet your own kids’ lives on the truth of the origin story for this policy, would you wager that it sprang from love as is claimed? Or might there have been a political motive — perhaps a board meeting in which someone raised fears about the losing battle against gay marriage and said, “We’ve got to make a stand here!” Could this policy have been one of the ideas that came out of a brainstorming session, after which it was debated with legal counsel and public relations teams, and was then eventually agreed as the optimal manner in which to legally and silently protect the church’s stance on gay marriage?

Having served as a clerk for many years with a responsibility for keeping church meeting records, I would bet that written meeting minutes for the introduction of this policy exist somewhere; perhaps the agenda is stored in the First Presidency’s vault, but if the secretary was doing his job, a record would have been kept. If the church was issued a subpoena and had to dig out the meeting minutes, do you think you would find the word *love* written anywhere in the proceedings? Or would you suspect that politics played a role here? If it was indeed a political move that was intended to take place under the table, perhaps the Church-paid consultants should be fired for underestimating the public backlash, placing overconfidence in the assumed confidentiality of the handbook, and dismissing the role of MormonLeaks and social media in disseminating the details of the policy to the world at large!

Or perhaps I’m completely off base with these insinuations and it came straight from God’s loving heart as is claimed, in which case the Saints are obliged to support it whether or not it smells fishy — just like they had to reluctantly (or in some cases whole-heartedly) defend so many years of racist policies. To me, the “love” explanation sounds awfully familiar, having heard the same argument about race-based exclusion:

“This policy originates from God’s love,” I’ve heard before, “after all, He knows that many church members aren’t ready to accept *them* yet, and He wouldn’t want *them* to feel excluded.”

“We love *them* so much that we wouldn’t want *them* to feel unwelcome in the temple.”

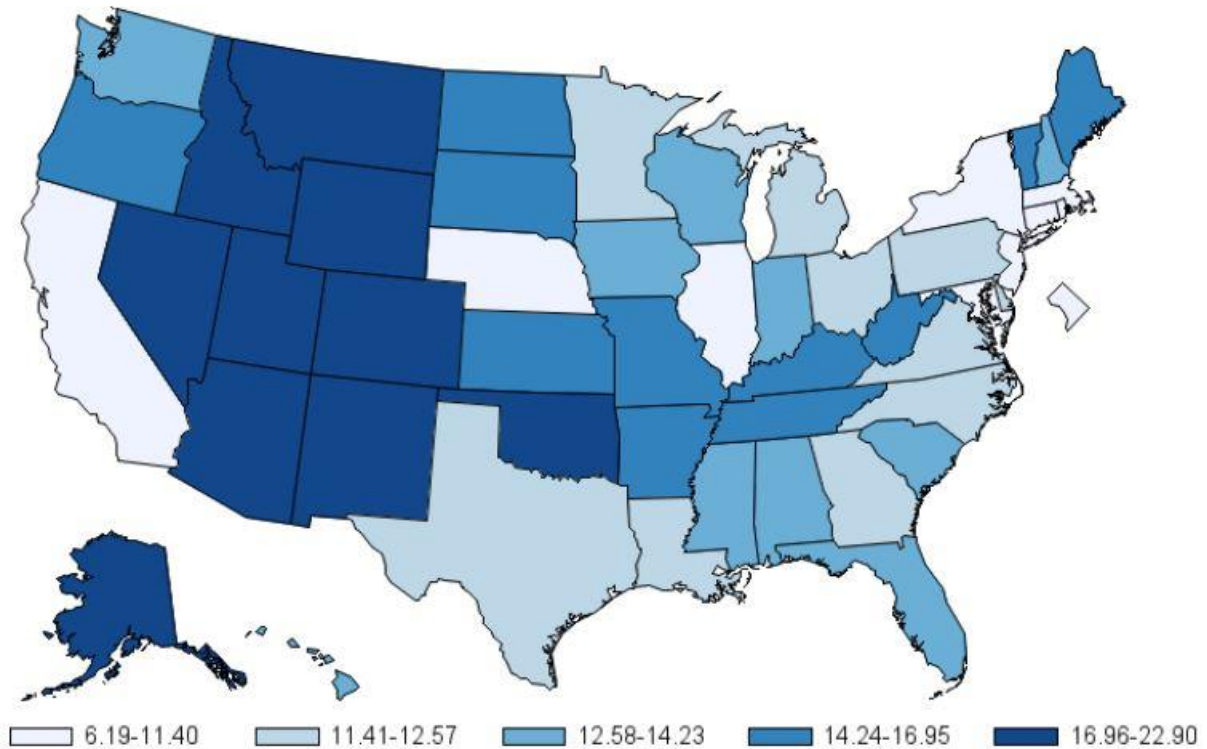
“Perhaps it’s not the best place for *them* to be right now.”

Ridiculous as those explanations sound, what alternative did pre-1978 Saints have when faced with the double-think, dissonant belief in a loving but exclusive God? My prediction is that the misplaced love claims of the November policy will someday get the same official reversal as the errant reasons for the priesthood ban. You can obviously decide in the meantime where you stand, but good luck defending a supportive stance to your kids once it is no longer supported by church leaders. In the meantime, I can’t do it. I quit!

In 2015, with suicide rates and depression rates rising among the Saints, especially among those feeling ostracized or guilt-ridden for their orientation, this was the answer? Let's have another look at the 2014 map, this time with the legend included:

Suicide Rates in the United States (by state; per 100,000; average 2008–2014)

Data Courtesy of CDC



Looking at the map, the colors appear relatively benign, but each change in shade represents hundreds and hundreds of shattered families. Nobody is claiming any religion bears all or even most of the responsibility for the devastating choices depicted in the maps. At most, Mormonism is one of a number of “reasons why”. But the question comes down to whether Church leaders have done all they can to combat the tragic trend. Knowing that at least some of the feelings of isolation that led to these very real acts of desperation were fueled by real judgment and real exclusion that in some cases originated from the supposed authority of church leaders to speak on God’s behalf, I do wonder how many of these were preventable tragedies.

If you were sitting in an office at church headquarters back in 2014 – armed with an authorized mantle of some sort – and you had a look at this map, would you feel an obligation to do something to address the issue and help make a positive change? Or would your first reaction be to hire a PR firm to blame the apparent trend on environmental factors that reduce your liability and release you from any obligation to initiate changes that might help reduce the tragic loss of life?

With or without the spin doctors’ backing, if you somehow found yourself at the conference center’s pulpit the next year – right in the center of the bluest area of the map – how would you express your love and concern to those listening? What would you proclaim?

This? A policy of exclusion and discrimination? That’s the way to show love? That’s the next paragraph in your Proclamation to the World?

Now I've rationalized and defended a lot of screwed-up historical policies in my forty years as a conscious Mormon, always believing that the current momentum was at least steering the church toward the same general trajectory as the civil rights movement and universal principles of equality, but this huge step backwards is just too much for my own gag reflex. It is as unnecessary as it is unfounded, and in my case the reflux leaves me unable to sit silently in my seat.

"Any opposed?"

I've heard that phrase repeated from the pulpit a thousand times over and have never felt a compelling enough reason to disrupt a meeting with a raised hand.

In this case, however, I finally feel compelled to rise to my feet with my hand high in the air. To state my opposition for the record, I'll shout out my own Proclamation to the World:

"I DECLARE that the November policy has NOTHING WHATSOEVER to do with love and EVERYTHING to do with fear."

And just like the 1995 proclamation issued by the church, I'll close my own family proclamation with an ALL CAPS challenge to be issued until the exclusive, discriminatory policy is revoked and disavowed:

"I CALL UPON all members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints to make 18 the new 8!"

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## 2020 Footnote:

The chapter above was written while the November Policy was still in place. Perhaps I should have felt some measure of relief when it was rescinded in April 2019 after less than four years on the books. In reality, the only hint of relief I felt was due to the fact that I had resigned my church membership before the reversal took place. As weak as my stance might have been, at least I wouldn't be stuck in the predicament of having to say, "Well, I never agreed with that policy in the first place" without having voiced my opposition to it at the time.

That small sliver of consolation was drowned out by a huge dose of indigestion that hit me when I read the language accompanying the policy reversal; I was left with the same sinking feeling I still have about the Church's claims of divine direction for race-based exclusion. In like fashion, this claim provides a preposterous but perhaps internally useful illusion: "Don't go blaming the Mormon Brethren for implementing a misguided policy to begin with here: they were simply revealing God's eternal will! So if you're the finger-pointing type of naysayer, you'll have to point your finger at God Himself, whose mind and will has simply been relayed through His humble vessels."

"No! You don't get to do that!" I actually shouted out loud at my phone when I read the announcement, perhaps interlaced with a few obscenities. Well, of course, they *get* to reverse the policy. That's absolutely within the organization's prerogative; and after all, that's what *Love Loud* and so many other voices have been pushing for all along. But what they don't get to do – at least, I would hope, not without some form of public backlash – is to attribute both trajectories to God's will.

You see, Mormons are taught that God can rescind his orders when the people are too wicked to handle them. The idol-worshipping revelers at the foot of Mount Sinai, for example, couldn't handle the higher law. Because of their hard-hearted wickedness, the lesser law was chiseled into the final set of stone tablets that Moses carried down the mountain. Is that what they're saying in the 2019 announcement that blames the reversal on reactionary "hate and contention" that surely only gentiles and apostates could have stirred up? Instead of lovingly accepting the policy, these hate-mongers caused a stink and interfered with God's righteous will. So where did this "spirit of contention" come from in the first place? Mormon scripture includes direct quotes in which Christ Himself calls the Devil the source of contention; so who in this case has succumbed to the snares of the Evil One?

Surely not the Brethren! If contention is indeed of the Devil, the opponents of the policy must have ceded their souls to Satan by getting caught up in a contentious spirit, necessitating the reversal. In other words, God reluctantly pulled back His earlier mandate because their unprepared, unsanctified hearts needed a lower law. Not because the initial order was wrong in the first place, of course, but because the wicked party animals and fornicators just weren't ready for it yet. Seriously? Am I nuts here for invoking the image of the Golden Calf, or is that the picture they're painting?



When various commands issued through Joseph Smith were revoked, he made sure that God wouldn't get the blame for flip-flopping. "Wherefore I, the Lord, command and revoke, as seemeth me good," states the 56<sup>th</sup> Section of the Doctrine and Covenants, but the finger is promptly pointed at the guilty culprit in the phrase that follows: "and all this to be answered upon the heads of the rebellious, saith the Lord."

However it's packaged, if you're going to claim that the *implementation* of the policy was the will of God, then you can't go around claiming that the *reversal* of the policy is likewise the will of God. If God had anything to do with it at all, either the implementation has a divine origin, or the reversal has a divine origin. Or perhaps neither. But not both! If the implementation was divine, the reversal is simply caving to public pressures. If the reversal was divine, the implementation was simply a case of mortal men being swayed by their own biases and political fears. Just like polygamy or the priesthood ban, you could try to argue that God's hand was present at one end of the time scale or the other...or not at all. But don't try to sell me some cockamamie story that a flip-flopping God directed both events. You're making up the rules again. I'm not playing anymore. Game over!

## Chapter 3: Disavowment

### My Analogy: Interwoven

“Mexicans should marry Mexicans” – Boyd K. Packer

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If you watch the trailer for the movie “Loving,” the true story behind the landmark Supreme Court case on interracial marriage, the couple’s right to marry seems utterly obvious today.

But back in 1964 when Mildred Loving pled with Robert Kennedy to consider the unconstitutionality of the charges against her, she had very few other allies. The situation in Utah wasn’t much different than in Mildred’s Virginia. With a 99% Caucasian student body, Brigham Young University lacked any substantial opportunity for integration, even if laws and doctrinal teachings hadn’t forbidden interracial marriage at the time.

BYU student Tony Morgan felt the pressure to get married as his graduation day approached in 1964. As an active Mormon and returned missionary, he had taken his mission release interviews seriously. In those interviews, both his mission president in France and his stake president back home in Utah had encouraged him to put his primary efforts into his next mission in life: fulfilling his familial, patriarchal obligations.

But even though he had spent the next four years surrounded by what should have been perfect matches for him, the connection never happened the way he had imagined it would. Tony had done quite well in school, but as the commencement speaker foretold workplace successes that were surely ahead for the top-ranked students, he had the distinct sense that he had failed at the most important mission of his collegiate years.

After graduation, he found himself working in a prominent research role for a life insurance company. Although disappointedly still looking for a soul mate, he was quickly moving up in his firm and making a good name for himself.

He was incredibly good with numbers; as an actuary, he also managed to put his stochastic skills to further use by producing extraordinary charts that considered all possible outcomes along with their relative chance of occurrence. He quickly embraced an emerging, computer-based science that consisted of tweaking every conceivable variable and combining the full range of possible

outcomes into a single set of probable scenarios. The procedure he was mastering had actually been developed during the Manhattan Project and further research at Los Alamos; it had been given the code name *Monte Carlo*, which was the casino where the developer's uncle used to gamble away his money, hoping to beat the highly improbable odds.

While presenting some of his work at a trade conference, Tony caught the eye of the Defense Department's computer code developers themselves, who offered him an interview on the spot. Tony had always wondered whether his Mormonism might be a detriment to his career, but Ezra Taft Benson's time in the Presidential cabinet showed him that anti-Communist sentiments could trump any difference in religious leanings. During the interview, he freely repeated sentiments he had learned from Benson, Skousen, and other prominent speakers during his time at BYU. Tony had been raised as an all-American patriot; his father had been a war hero, and he knew that losing the Cold War would undo everything his own father fought for. He was willing to pledge his life for his country, and his passion came across clearly in the interview.

The interviewers decided that he would be a great asset to Uncle Sam, and it wasn't long before Tony was poached by the feds to help further refine their Monte Carlo techniques. He was extremely proud that his research would aid the CIA, NASA, and a number of other agencies that could help the U.S. win the Cold War. As his reputation and influence grew, Tony couldn't believe that a boy from Farmington, Utah could walk the halls of the Pentagon and report to five-star generals.

He began to receive exciting overseas assignments, and he was thrilled to be able to use his programming skills to help other governments fight the threat of Communism that seemed to be spreading like a plague around the world.

On one particularly fateful trip, he boarded a flight to Cairo and found himself sitting next to an attractive young woman with whom he struck up a conversation. With her olive skin and long, black hair, she didn't look much like the BYU co-eds he had dated in Provo. Just a few minutes into their conversation, the life experience she described made his previous dates seem a bit naïve about the world. Tony knew he should have been sleeping or preparing for his upcoming meetings, but he stayed wide awake over the next twelve hours while they both bared their souls to each other.

It all seemed so natural, and at least to Tony, the chance meeting felt like destiny. The plane landed all too quickly, and he had to admit to himself that in that brief period, he had already started to fall in love. They didn't plan it; it just happened.

As soon as they stepped off the plane, they had to part ways to catch their connecting flights. If they wanted to see each other again, they both knew full well that it would take a concerted, mutual effort. Tony's sleep-deprived mind was spinning. Should he take the gamble?

Aided by a swarm of butterflies, he decided on a leap of faith.

"Can I give you my num-" he began to ask, pulling out a piece of paper. But before he had even finished the question, she had already interrupted him by pressing a scrap of paper into his shirt pocket.

"I need to run if I'm going to make my connection," she said.

He awkwardly thanked her for her number and promised he would call. Without a kiss or even a handshake, she backed away and gave him a wave and a smile. He stood in silence and watched her fade into the crowd, his soul full of indescribable feelings of peace and harmony and

universal destiny that temporarily trumped every analytical path in his head. Everything mattered, but nothing else mattered, because absolutely everything in the Universe seemed to have joined forces to bring them to their chance meeting.

Tony eventually made his way to his own gate and sat down to wait for his flight to board. The 12-hour dialogue was playing back in his mind, with the tape in his head rewinding and fast-forwarding to each of the topics they had discussed. He had learned a great deal about her travels and her insights into politics and world events, but he quickly realized how much he *didn't* know about her. She had told him her name was Gina, for instance, but he didn't know a thing about her hometown.

He frantically dug the paper out of his pocket, hoping to get a clue from the spelling. Disappointingly, it was only a number. He wondered if Gina might be short for Regina, a German name. Or maybe it was an Italian nickname like for the actress Luigina? Or maybe her name was Jina, with a Korean origin. He had seen her pull out a reddish-colored passport when they went through the airport immigration lines; other than noticing that she didn't have a blue passport like his, though, he had no idea of her actual nationality.

For the next hour, he sat there at the gate unable to think of anything else. Little as he knew about her, he had to concede that he was already smitten. Eventually he looked at his watch, wondering if he had time to run to her gate and ask her a few more questions.

By the time he checked his watch, though, her flight had already departed, and Tony realized that it was all in his court now. He hadn't given Gina his own number, so she was never going to be able to call him. He stared at the handwritten characters on the scrap of paper, which started with the number 2.

"Of course!" he thought, "The country code!"

A new set of country codes had just been implemented around the world earlier that year, with the first digit indicating the continent. Running to a pay phone, he looked for the first digit of its own number: it was also a 2.

"Africa!" Tony said to himself, feeling a bit like a detective.

The next two numbers were a 1 and a 3. He flipped up the massive phone book, but the Arabic characters were of no use to him. Next to the phone, though, he saw a placard with a list of the new country codes for international travelers. Scrolling through the index he discovered that 213 placed the phone number in Algeria. Was that Gina's home? Was she just visiting there? Was it the number to her own apartment? To her parents' place? A hotel?

Should he just dial the number and leave his details with anyone who answers? If so, his American accent would certainly give away his identity, and on arrival Gina would know that he had called, potentially marking the beginning of a long-distance relationship with all of its entailing implications.

At this point in his life, only a relationship with a viable chance of progressing toward marriage would warrant the investment of a phone call that was sure to throw his world into a huge spin. Who was this girl anyway, and did they even stand any chance of ending up together? If not, he knew that scrap of paper belonged in the trash can!

He went back to his seat to piece things together logically, staring at a large world map on the wall while he gathered his thoughts.

Fidgety and restless, he decided to start writing down his thoughts and – as he was apt to do – charting out the risks and consequences associated with his options. He opened his briefcase and reached for his journal, but instead his eyes rested on the scriptures that he always carried with him. Faced with such a potentially consequential decision, he thought it might be prudent to first seek some advice from the prophets themselves. Hoping to underscore any prospective intercession, he first held the books using both hands and uttered a silent prayer for discernment. Then, with his thumb flipping through the gold-leafed pages like a ball in a roulette wheel, he hoped he might land on a winning number that would tell him what to do and absolve him of having to make his own decision.

In this case, he had to acknowledge the same “lack of wisdom” that his hero prophet had faced a century and a half before. Shouldn’t this be one decision in which he, like Joseph, was entitled to some sort of divine guidance? Over and over again, he would arrive at a random verse and read it through repeatedly. But none of the passages he pointed to seemed to have the slightest relevance to his pointed question. Was this the dreaded “stupor of thought” that his scriptures equated to a negative response from God?

Tony’s next inclination was to drop to his knees, but he realized that kneeling on the floor might look a bit odd to his fellow travellers, particularly if a beam of light appeared over his head – an image that made him laugh at the absurdity of his own expectations. As a more practical alternative, he thought of joining the Muslims in the nearest airport prayer room, but he didn’t want to miss any flight announcements, so he stayed put.

What was he thinking anyway? Did he really have to make any consequential decisions right then and there? He did not want to risk falling in love with someone God wouldn’t approve of, but perhaps it was already too late for that. If he knew in advance that she wouldn’t be a candidate due to her background or beliefs, there would be no sense in taking things any further at all; he considered his time to be much too valuable to play games with a short-term fling. Without divine affirmation, he knew he would just have to drop it altogether and hope that God would bless him with a worthy partner down the road of this life or the next.

He conceded that silent prayers were his only hope for deliverance from this predicament. Armed since childhood with Moroni’s promise as his spiritual divining rod, he hoped to receive a simple *yes* or *no* answer from God Himself to guide his next step. He wished he had access to a *Liahona* like his scriptural heroes had, where the directions for his next step would just magically appear in plain letters – as long as he was really, really righteous. Had he been living righteously enough to deserve an answer? He didn’t need a big string of text here, just a single letter would suffice: *Y* or *N*.

As he swayed back and forth with his decision, he momentarily envied the arranged marriages of the Old Testament where personal choice wasn’t even a factor. He knew that wouldn’t bring true happiness either, but at least he could blame someone else for the decision rather than running the risk of making his own blunder! Stuck in the latter days, he felt the burden of his own agency. Staring at the Bible in his hands, he realized that he would be unlikely to find any relevant advice written in the days of concubines and dowries. Perhaps the modern-day prophets would have something more applicable to say than their ancient counterparts. He put his scriptures away, dug back through his briefcase and pulled out the latest Improvement Era magazine that he had brought along to read on the plane.



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- College of Physical Education
- College of Religious Instruction

On the inside cover was an advertisement for BYU, including a photograph of Y Mountain. The elusive "Y" that he was hoping to spot was covered by snow in the photograph, but his eyes focused on the text of the advertisement, which called the school by its nickname, the "Y". Was that his answer? Yes?

He felt silly looking for answers in this way, so he put down the magazine, leaned back and stared at the wall again. The large compass drawn in the middle of the ocean caught his eye, in particular the letter "N" right at the top. The opposite answer? No?

He was driving himself crazy with this ambiguity. He always made very calculated decisions for himself and wasn't superstitious in any other aspect of his life; in fact, he tended to mock horoscopes and those who adhered to the arbitrary advice of columnists and psychics. Surely he could find something more substantive than seeking signs in random letters!

He turned back to the Improvement Era which was, after all, the official "Voice of the Church" as its subtitle attested. He scanned each page, hoping to find an appropriate article that might match his predicament. In between advertisements for Standard Oil and ZCMI, a girl in a wedding dress caught his eye. The bride and groom were pictured at the top of a Bookcraft ad highlighting fourteen "must-have" books for Latter-Day Saints. The book was entitled "Time and Eternity" by the apostle Mark E. Petersen. The caption said it laid out a case for the "necessity of temple marriage." Now Tony didn't know anything about Gina's religious background, but surely this criterion would exclude her from consideration. Tony feared what he might run across in the words of a hard-liner like Elder Petersen, who had ruffled feathers during Tony's years at BYU by pushing for segregated chapels and preaching that exaltation was not possible for those of African descent. His attitudes on courting were likely to be similarly exclusive, so Tony decided to keep moving.

He looked at the other book titles and didn't see much of interest until he got to the last one. Number 14 was a book by Hugh B. Brown, the first counselor to the prophet, entitled "You and

Your Marriage.” He wanted advice on dating and courting, not necessarily marriage, but perhaps it would include some relevant, pre-matrimonial material. Besides, given Elder Brown’s contrastingly public support for integration among his fellow apostles, Tony thought his views on marriage might be equally liberal – perhaps even allowing an exception for someone like Gina. The ad included a clip-out order form, and Tony contemplated filling it out with the number 14 circled. The book would likely take weeks to arrive, though, and who could guess where in the world Gina might be by then – and whether another suitor might have entered her life in the meantime. That thought made Tony cringe. Might there be someone sitting next to her on her flight, perhaps striking her interest right at that very moment? The book wasn’t going to help him at all; he needed some more immediate advice.

As he flipped past the ads and through the pages of further articles, he couldn’t believe his luck when he ran across a column on marriage by Hugh B. Brown – it was an excerpt straight from Book #14; he wouldn’t have to wait after all!

He read through the article with gradually diminishing excitement, however; each paragraph seemed to add insurmountable distance and obstacles to the path between him and Gina. While Elder Brown was generally quite liberal in his views on racism and other social issues, it became apparent that he held a very conservative notion of marriage.

The article began with a biblical quote: “Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers.”

The imagery made Tony think of his own pioneer ancestors trekking along frozen rivers and narrow cliffside trails with their ox carts. He imagined the disastrous consequences of an imbalanced team; who in their right mind would want to take that sort of risk? He also wondered if the passage was meant to imply that unbelievers were unequal to believers, where one could pull the weight and the other couldn’t? Or did it mean that they would merely try to pull the cart in different directions with equal strength? Whatever the case, would Gina be considered a non-believer in this analogy? Tony wondered what sort of beliefs and believers the reference might extend to. Believers in Christ? Believers in Paul? Believers in Joseph Smith? Believers in Hugh B. Brown and his position as a prophet, seer, and revelator?

As for himself, Tony believed firmly in all of these sources of truth; he had also been taught that the most recent prophet’s advice trumps any outdated prophetic words because of its latter-day relevance. And right in plain words, the first paragraph of Elder Brown’s modern-day revelation included the church’s “insistence” that members marry within the Church.

The rest of the article laid out a clear case against inter-faith marriage, focusing on the reasons to avoid straying outside your own faith even in dating. Tony’s initial euphoria began to fade with each page, replaced by a growing fear of pursuing a relationship with Gina.

Among other advice, in direct words quoted from God’s appointed mouthpiece on earth, the article stated, “Let Catholics marry Catholics, and let Latter-Day Saints do the same.”

“It is unwise to start out with fundamental differences; and differences in religion are fundamental.”



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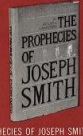


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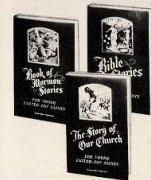
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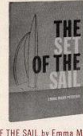
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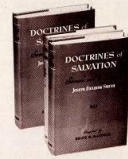
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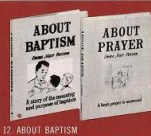
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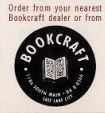
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BY PRESIDENT HUGH B. BROWN

"Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers." (2 Cor. 6:14)

Some of our young people, and others, have wondered if The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is peculiar or unique in its insistence that its members should marry within the Church. It may be interesting to some to know that leaders of other churches have, down through the ages, counseled their members to marry within their own faith.

Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish leaders in all nations agree that inter-faith marriages frequently end in separation or divorce. Several national studies have been made on this important question, and they show that the chances of divorce and separation are two and one-half times greater in inter-faith marriages than where the partners are of the same faith. These studies further show that even where such marriages do not break up in divorce or separation, the difference in religious opinions and convictions is at the root of much unhappiness.

If either one or both parties to such marriages are sincere in their religious convictions, there is sure to

ful marriage calls for mental, emotional, and spiritual unity, without which complete and satisfactory union between husband and wife is unattainable. Where spiritual unity prevails all phases of married life, other differences become insignificant. But antagonistic church allegiance is like a flaw in a building which extends from the foundation to the roof.

Divisive disputes caused by religious differences generally result in conflicts in a wider area than that of specific religious belief and observance. Even if for the sake of harmony, the parties agree to become inactive in any church, still the carry-over of their early religious training, the cultural patterns and personal values will aggravate and complicate the problems of day-to-day living.

In Orthodox Judaism there is detailed regulation in daily living. Catholicism requires submission to the authority of the church, while Protestantism generally stresses individual freedom. Most young people raised in any one of these religious groups are deeply affected by their early training, and if they marry into different faiths and undertake to raise a family, their

fundamental problems are vastly increased.

In The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, there are many additional, fundamental reasons for marrying within the Church. Its members believe that the gospel of Jesus Christ has been restored, that they have a divine commission to live its principles and teach its doctrines and way of life, therefore, they cannot compromise without being untrue to themselves and to their children. Adherence to its principles and doctrines is incumbent by divine revelation upon all its members, and they who accept such revelation are anxious that their children shall be taught its principles and live according to its standards. Some of the teachings of the Church are, by other people, looked upon as unusual and extreme. A young man or woman may, for a time, tolerate in his mate practices and indulgences which are forbidden, but the Latter-day Saint boy or girl who marries out of the Church must expect the question to arise and become more vital as children come into the home. No true Latter-day Saint would wish to have his children leave the Church, sacrifice its blessings, or be raised

WHY MARRY WITHIN

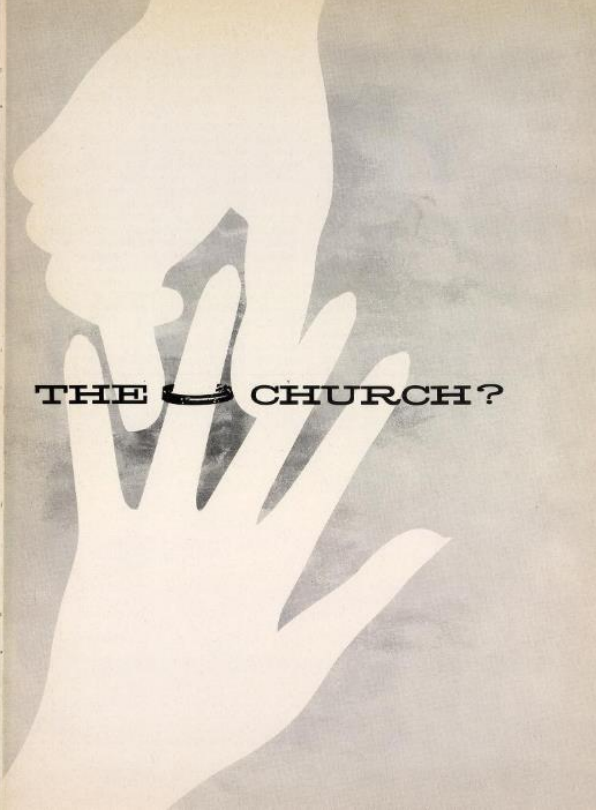
come a time, especially after children come into the home, when one or the other must yield, unless both are willing to give up religious practices altogether. If they choose the latter alternative, it means their children will be brought up without any kind of church attachment.

Reliable statistics show that where both parents were Catholic, ninety-two percent of their sons remain Catholic. Where both parents were Protestant, sixty-eight percent of their sons were practicing Protestants, but where one parent was Catholic and the other Protestant, only thirty-four percent of the children were practicing members of either faith. There are so many adjustments to be made in the average marriage, that it is unwise to start out with fundamental differences; and differences in religion are fundamental.

Young people, during their courtship, may feel that their emotional harmony will make their differing faiths unimportant, but this does not prove to be true in actual experience. It is not difficult to maintain friendships across the barriers of religion, but success-

From the book You and Your Marriage by President Hugh B. Brown, published by Bookcraft

THE CHURCH?



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THE IMPROVEMENT ERA

The article went on to deride not just differences in religion, but in “cultural patterns” as well. In the case of an interfaith marriage, “a satisfactory union is unattainable,” and Elder Brown added that a difference in faith was like “a flaw in a building that extends from the foundation to the roof.”

Although the title of the book made it sound like it would be geared toward advice for married couples, most of what Tony read seemed like the pre-marital advice he had been seeking – only he hadn’t counted on it being so blunt.

“Date only those who are in your own faith.”

He had been hoping instead to find some advice that might help him to recognize the signs of true love. Love? Had there even been any mention of love? Tony scoured through the article once more from beginning to end looking for a single reference to the word; it was nowhere to be found! Did love even exist as a variable in this equation? Or was a testimony of the restored gospel more important than love itself?

Perhaps she could take the missionary discussions and eventually become converted to Mormonism, Tony thought. But what if they both fell for each other and she decided that Mormonism wasn’t for her?

Anyone contemplating such a union should “consider whether they will be willing to lose their children here or hereafter or both, rather than reject a juvenile infatuation.”

Juvenile? Tony was a college graduate, well past any puppy love stage. Was this nothing more than an infatuation in the eyes of the Brethren, he wondered. Was there no possibility of genuine love here? If he pursued a relationship with a non-Mormon, would it really be destined to end with an eternal separation from his own children?

The article included advice for anyone foolish enough to get involved in an interfaith engagement: “A broken engagement is better than a broken home.”

The article didn’t leave room for any flexibility at all, claiming that “there can be no warm family fellowship” in the permanently broken home of an interfaith household.

Love had no power after all.

“Be satisfied with nothing less than *celestial marriage*,” Tony read in closing, “a prerequisite to admittance to the highest degree of the celestial kingdom.”

Well, he had his answer; this particular requirement was non-negotiable. The only variable that mattered in Gina’s case was her eventual willingness to become Mormon.

Now if Gina wasn’t even a Christian at this point, Tony knew he would have a far greater challenge on his hands in getting her to accept not just the Book of Mormon, but the Virgin Birth, a universal atonement, and the exclusive insistence that Jesus is the only gateway to heaven, leaving everyone else – including potentially her own friends and family members – to wallow in eternal, post-mortal sorrow. Mormonism aside, that would take quite a leap. He could only hope she had some sort of Christian background or would at least be open-minded enough to accept its fundamental tenets.

Dejected, he put the magazine back into his briefcase and waited for the next flight announcement. Eventually an update came, but unfortunately in the form of flight delays. He was going to be stuck in this indecisive state of limbo for at least another few hours.

Tony pulled out his journal to record his thoughts. Not sure where to start, he looked around at the people coming and going in the international terminal. He started thinking about the odds of plucking two random people from the crowd and testing their mutual compatibility.

Just like in his Monte Carlo work, it would require charting out every possible scenario. Before writing any words at all in his journal, he decided to pull out some graph paper and start sketching out a chart much like he had always done in preparing presentations as an actuary.

It was obvious from the prophetic words that religious unity was *the* key consideration in marital compatibility. So backing up a step, he made a list of all the major religions he could think of, then laid it out into a matrix. Placing a check-mark in boxes with approved unions and an "X" to symbolize forbidden unions, the slim chance of compatibility between strangers started to take on a graphical form.

	Buddhism	Christianity	Confucianism	Hinduism	Islam	Judaism	Sikhism	Taoism	Unaffiliated
Buddhism	✓	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Christianity	X	✓	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Confucianism	X	X	✓	X	X	X	X	X	X
Hinduism	X	X	X	✓	X	X	X	X	X
Islam	X	X	X	X	✓	X	X	X	X
Judaism	X	X	X	X	X	✓	X	X	X
Sikhism	X	X	X	X	X	X	✓	X	X
Taoism	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	✓	X
Unaffiliated	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	✓

He knew his little chart was incomplete in terms of world religions, but he could already see the emerging pattern in his limited array: membership-based weighting aside, any two random people from a mixed crowd would only stand about a one in ten chance of potential compatibility.

So what if the two people happened to be lucky enough to both be Christian? If a Christian wished to marry another follower of Christ, could the manner in which their priests or pastors interpret the teachings of Christ differ so greatly that they should break off their relationship with each other? If they happen to rely on differing interpretations of what Christ actually meant with the things he said, are they really eternally incompatible? Tony knew full well that even those who claim to follow Christ and read the same Bible can't agree on how to actually practice Christianity; with this acknowledgment, he felt the potential prospects in his matrix shrinking down even further.

He put a question mark in the Christian-Christian nexus box and decided to expand it with its own matrix, listing the some of the Christian denominations that came to mind along each axis.

	Buddhism	Christianity	Confucianism	Hinduism	Islam	Judaism	Sikhism	Taoism	Unaffiliated
Buddhism	✓	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Christianity	X	✓	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Confucianism	X	X	✓	X	X	X	X	X	X
Hinduism	X	X	X	✓	X	X	X	X	X
Islam	X	X	X	X	✓	X	X	X	X
Judaism	X	X	X	X	X	✓	X	X	X
Sikhism	X	X	X	X	X	X	✓	X	X
Taoism	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	✓	X
Unaffiliated	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	✓

	Anglican	Baptist	Catholic	Jehovah's Witness	LDS	Lutheran	Methodist	Pentacostal	Presbyterian
Anglican	✓	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Baptist	X	✓	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Catholic	X	X	✓	X	X	X	X	X	X
Jehovah's Witness	X	X	X	✓	X	X	X	X	X
LDS	X	X	X	X	✓	X	X	X	X
Lutheran	X	X	X	X	X	✓	X	X	X
Methodist	X	X	X	X	X	X	✓	X	X
Pentacostal	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	✓	X
Presbyterian	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	✓

Tony knew he was leaving off a whole lot of denominations, but he had to cut it off somewhere. He could see that if a chart of sub-sects was embedded into each of the major religions, he would be looking at even slimmer chances, with only one in a hundred or so unions acceptable to God. He stared at the LDS-LDS box, which according to his own exclusive, internal doctrines was the only box that should really get a check mark at all – every other union being equally invalid and unauthorized.

So what if two random people who meet each other just happen to strike the minutely improbable jackpot with their mutual Mormonism? A green light? Well, according to the words of Elder Brown and each of his predecessors, Mormons still have at least one more question to answer:

“Are you a front-row or a back-row Mormon?”

If you don't happen to come from the same set of pews in church, you'd better be warned that you might be in for quite a struggle. In fact, if your potential Mormon mate isn't the card-carrying temple-type, not only will they be shut out of the gates – you will be too! And you'll lose your kids for all eternity to boot!

So if you happen to pick two people who both happen to hold a temple recommend, then you'd be in luck, right? Could he and Gina become those two lucky people?

Tony's obsession with numbers and statistics carried back well past his mission encounters, which he had tracked methodically. He thought of the ten thousand doors he had knocked as a missionary. And the one in a ten that opened. And of those, the one in ten that allowed him to enter. And of those, the one in five that led to viable discussions. And of those, the half who actually came to church. Of those the one in five that resulted in baptism. And finally, the one in two – literally, one of two real people – that ended up in the temple. After two years of hard labor, in his case, his efforts had culminated in the endowment of a single soul! One in 10,000 sure seemed like a miniscule probability – a 0.01% chance! But ever since his primary days, in reference to bringing a single soul to Christ, Tony had been armed with the question, “How great shall be your joy?”

Since his return, whenever someone put him on the spot with the awkward question, “How many people did you convert?” he often claimed that he would do it all over again for another single soul if the call came. Was Gina's conversion destined to be his next call? Did she stand a better

chance of accepting the Mormon message than whoever sat behind a random door in one of the French villages he had roamed on his bicycle?

Minute as the probability seemed from his vantage on an airport bench, at least it represented a plausible prospect. In Gina’s case, he knew that policy dictated a minimum one-year wait even under the most optimistic scenario; but if the stars aligned, she might just have the chance of holding a temple recommend someday – potentially checking the requisite box with a divine blessing.

	Anglican	Baptist	Catholic	Jehovah's Witness	LDS	Lutheran	Methodist	Pentacostal	Presbyterian
Anglican	✓	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Baptist	x	✓	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Catholic	x	x	✓	x	x	x	x	x	x
Jehovah's Witness	x	x	x	✓	x	x	x	x	x
LDS	x	x	x	x	✓	x	x	x	x
Lutheran	x	x	x	x	x	✓	x	x	x
Methodist	x	x	x	x	x	x	✓	x	x
Pentacostal	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	✓	x
Presbyterian	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	✓

Staring at his charts, however, Tony realized he had only been considering a single variable and that there was much, much more to contemplate.

In addition to her *religion*, he realized that he knew nothing of her *race* or her *nationality*. They had talked about a lot of topics during the flight, but he had embarrassingly missed all three of these critical pieces of information. How might these additional parameters affect his equation? A person’s religion might change, he figured, so that variable in his equation was truly *variable*; but now Tony was faced with the sinking realization that her race and nation of origin were fixed – as were the prophetic warnings against stirring the pot.

Gina seemed to have a darker complexion. Had it just been the lighting on the plane, or did her skin tone reflect an ethnic background? The phone number she had given Tony was from Algeria, a mixing pot of ethnicities if there ever was one. Tony knew from his mission days that there were plenty of European Algerians – with French, Spanish, or Italian roots – living alongside those with Arabic or sub-Saharan origins. Where did Gina fit in? Was there African blood in her? The cursed seed of Cain? Could he imagine being yoked together through future battles with someone who had proved to be less valiant in pre-mortal wars?

Although interracial marriage had been legalized in Utah the previous year, it still was not considered moral by church leaders, who had actively opposed repealing miscegenation laws. From a wide range of pulpits and podiums throughout his Mormon upbringing and university education, Tony had repeatedly heard dire threats about racial mixing. A mixed marriage, after all, wouldn’t just exclude the “loathsome”, dark-skinned spouse from salvation; the “white and delightful” spouse would have their own temple blessings rescinded, excavating an equally wide chasm in the road back to God and His Son.

While interracial unions were viewed by church leaders as being offensive to God, the far greater threat lay with the generations to come. A mixed couple was likely to produce offspring, thereby forcing otherwise innocent, mixed-race babies to enter the world with no chance for redemption. Giving up your own salvation was one thing, but robbing someone else of theirs was quite another. According to the namesake of Tony's own alma mater, the crime of interracial propagation was downright Satanic!

Tony looked around at the complexion of his fellow travellers and decided to make another chart based on race or ethnicity. In his insurance work, he had frequently been asked to break down probabilities and propensities by race. His employer had relied on the disputed U.S. census categories for these tasks; given the many shades he saw around him, Tony wasn't quite sure how to define the dividing lines, but he decided to start with those seven groups.

Once again, his chances began to take a graphical form. If he accepted the notion that God frowned on mixed-race relationships, only those unions that fell along the straight, diagonal line through the middle of his chart would be marked acceptable. The narrow band of check marks stood out to Tony like the perfect squares in a multiplication table. Could he bring himself to believe that the rest of the products were unlawful and offensive in God's eyes? Did Gina's ethnicity doom their relationship from the beginning with a big, fat "X"?

	African	Asian	European	Hispanic/Latino	Middle Eastern	Native American	Pac. Fic Islander
African	✓	X	X	X	X	X	X
Asian	X	✓	X	X	X	X	X
European	X	X	✓	X	X	X	X
Hispanic/Latino	X	X	X	✓	X	X	X
Middle Eastern	X	X	X	X	✓	X	X
Native American	X	X	X	X	X	✓	X
Pac. Fic Islander	X	X	X	X	X	X	✓

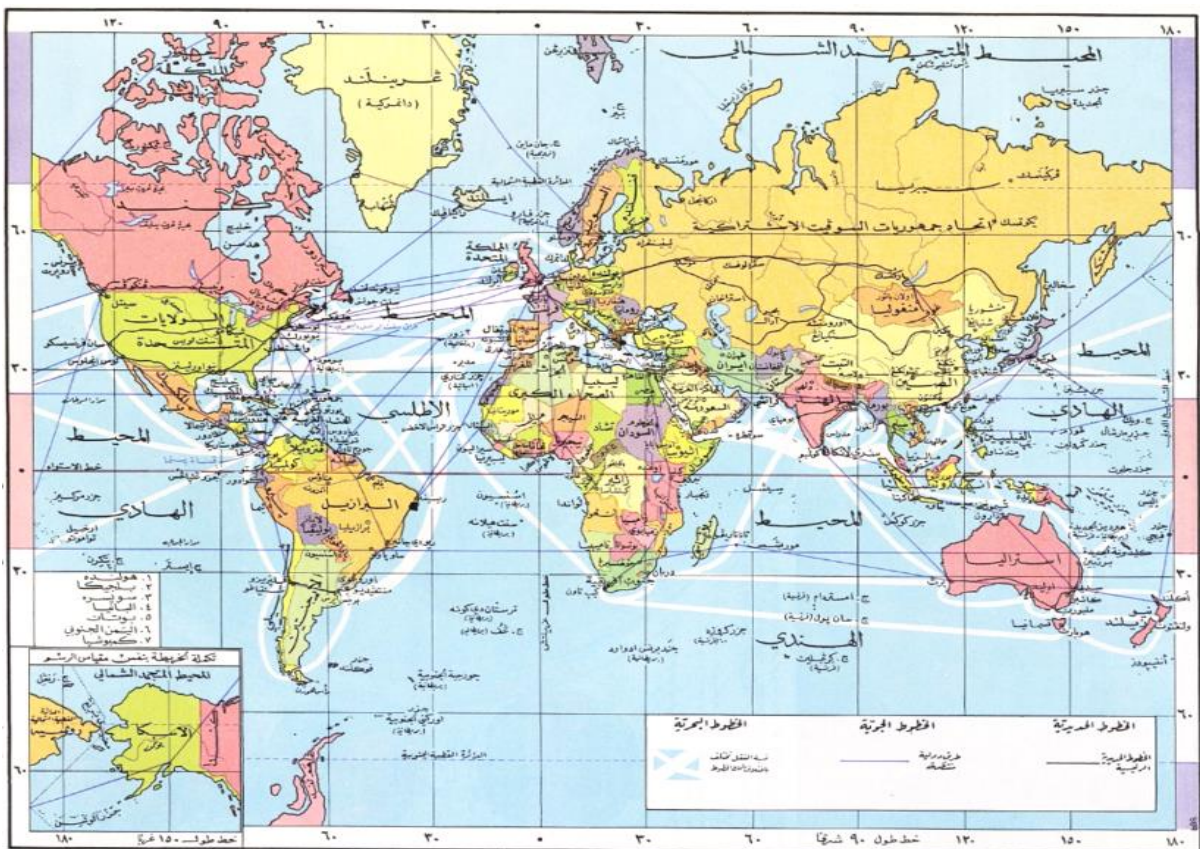
Tony's only comforting glimmer of light came from his current ignorance about Gina's background. So what if he ended up winning this improbable lottery, discovering that she was not just willing to join the LDS Church, but that she was just Caucasian enough to be deemed temple-worthy as well? Would they then be in the clear with the boxes of matching religions and ethnic backgrounds ticked?

Well, unfortunately for Mormons there are further tests that limit God's favor to even slimmer pickings. You see, LDS apostle Boyd K. Packer said, "Mexicans should marry Mexicans, Japanese should marry Japanese," and so on. So we're not only talking about race and religion, we're also talking about nationality, which requires an even narrower filter. Tony had received this same message from his mission president every time a local French girl turned the head of one of his fellow elders.

“Leave the French girls for the French boys,” they were repeatedly told; after all, “the gathering place for the French is in France.”

Like every other mission rule, ten-fold blessings were predicated on the obedience to this standard, and Tony had obediently avoided any social contact with single women in his mission zone.

Tony looked up at the world map on the wall. France was just one little country in a big world; thanks in part to the warped projection of the map, even the United States looked tiny next to countries like the USSR. Were his prospects really limited to that small, parochial territory? If God really didn’t want his children falling in love with anyone outside their own borders, maybe Tony should just stay put from now on and stop traveling internationally. The thought filled him with a sense of claustrophobia; under those constraints, you might as well commend instead of condemn the Russians for the walls they were building to keep people inside of their own occupation zones.



Tony looked at the indecipherable, Arabic names of the countries on the map; to pass the time, he tried to name as many as he could think of. He pulled out a new sheet of graph paper and started listing some of the country names along both axes of a new matrix.

He quickly jotted down about forty country names, which was about all he had room for on his graph paper anyway. He could see that even this limited-scale graph would require hundreds of crosses, so he just got out his red scripture-marking pencil and started coloring in the “unapproved” unions. He marked the slim band of approvals in green, which barely showed up against the distinct sea of red.

He always like to be comprehensive in his work, but to show the true proportions by accounting for all of the world’s two hundred or so nations, he knew that this particular matrix

would have to be over twenty times larger, displaying an even more consuming coat of red. In addition, he also realized that in order to comply with every level of his creed, this larger chart would need to be progressively embedded inside the other charts of religious and racial compatibility that he had made, further shrinking the sliver of acceptable scenarios with any probability of success.

Nonetheless, this final chart did a fine job of showing his chances graphically. It forced him to acknowledge that his immediate options were very, very limited:



Tony’s career had been built around making calculated choices, and he tried to apply the same principles to this new, personal predicament. In this case, when he weighed it all out, he concluded that his chance of success with Gina was effectively nil. Whatever her religion, whatever her racial background, he knew she lacked the prized, blue passport: Strike three!

So what should he do with this insight? What was his duty to God now?

The final boarding call was finally announced, and Tony stood up to board the plane, pulling the scrap of paper out of his shirt pocket.

Love? Armed with glorious rewards of “principalities and powers and thrones and dominions” that were tied to his earthly servitude, love itself really seemed like a juvenile concept as Elder Brown had alluded. These promises and more – including planets and eternal posterity – would be the just compensation for those who “endure valiantly” according to the restored gospel. True Mormons, including his own ancestors, had been asked to sacrifice so much more. Some of them had *valiantly endured* a frigid trek and lost loved ones in the process; others had entered into polygamous relationships that went against every inclination of propriety they possessed; a few had

even offered both of these sacrifices to their Lord. Giving up on this hint of true love felt as painful to Tony as any previous sacrifice he had made during his long mission days, but at the end of this very long day, he was able to treat his offering in the same way: it was a trial to be “valiantly endured”. In Tony’s case, the trivial notion of love was temporarily going to need to take a back seat in order to clear the way for far greater things to come. If this was a test, he determined not just to pass it but to ace it. Surely his ancestors had received their eternal reward for their sacrifices, and surely he would receive his.

Wouldn’t a loving God who is testing his faith eventually send him a viable prospect if he passed this test? So if he just happened to feel some attraction for someone who just happened to sit next to him on this next flight or on any future journey, he made the determination that he would first check the all-important boxes of common nationality, race, and religion before letting his pesky feelings go any further. Serendipity be damned! If she just happened to fall in the red zone, and if he somehow deluded himself into thinking that true love might be brewing, denying that love was part of his perceived priesthood duty; like a future with Gina, it was just one of those sacrifices that life demanded of him. “Turn it off,” as they say!

He took one last glance at the payphone as the queue progressed, knowing that if he ever had any regrets about the decision, this moment of true clarity and courage would have the final word.

He tossed the note into the trash can near the gate, handed over his ticket, and boarded the plane.

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By the time Tony returned home to Utah, the scrap of paper was deteriorating in a landfill, sacrificed on an altar of analytical obedience. He never saw Gina again, but he thought of her often, still believing that he would be blessed in the future for denying the inclinations of the “natural man” and following the admonition of the prophets by letting her go. He continued to serve in the Church year after year, remaining strong in his convictions and trusting his leaders; every once in a while, in a moment of weakness, he thought of trying to research flight records or otherwise attempting to dig up a trace of Gina’s whereabouts. But he knew his destiny was to find someone who shared his race, his religion, and his nationality; after all, a temple marriage – which he assumed included all the prerequisite commonality – had been promised to him in his own patriarchal blessing.

Besides, he knew that his own leaders couldn’t possibly lead anyone astray. Even if he couldn’t explain their words sometimes, and even when they ended up reversing their position on racial exclusions and other matters over the years, Tony conceded that God knew the greater good. He clung to the notion that a loving father in heaven would reward him for his adherence to the direction he received at the time, even if the fulfilment of his patriarchal promises had to be postponed until the post-mortal realm.

Gina ended up running an Algerian restaurant in Paris with her French husband whom she met a few years after the Cairo flight. She had lived the rest of her life assuming Tony wasn’t interested in her, because he had never called.

Tony just recently passed away. He never felt the spark again like he had on that twelve-hour flight to Cairo, but he ended up having a rewarding career and led a fulfilling life of world travel. Those who knew him called him a true American hero; the Monte Carlo analyses that he

helped to advance indeed contributed to the U.S. victory in the Cold War. His techniques had been applied from the Space Race to the Arms Race, and from the Energy Crisis to the Hostage Crisis. He had pioneered innovative methods of analysis which were highlighted in his obituary. Little did those who read about his accomplishments know, however, that he never came to grips with the most important analysis he had ever performed.

Toward the end of his life, he ultimately realized that he had based his compatibility charts on dodgy data and shoddy assumptions. Although the Church never officially gave mixed marriage their blessing, the reversals around other key issues helped convince Tony that he had been misinformed from the beginning and that he should have just followed his own conscience all along. He concluded that restrictions based on religion were only needed because of unfounded claims of exclusivity which ought to be done away with anyway – and that there was absolutely no sacred foundation at all for restrictions based on ethnicity or nationality.

When the appointed estate manager came to clear Tony's belongings out of his house, he made a fascinating discovery. On the living room wall hung oversize charts just like the ones Tony had started sketching out in the Cairo Airport. The charts included hundreds of portraits that had been attached with push-pins and Scotch tape. Each portrait showed a different couple, some with each partner looking quite distinct from one another, others remarkably similar. Some of the portraits were photographs, some were photocopies, and some were clipped from magazines and newspapers. The estate manager wasn't quite sure what to make of it all, so he snapped a photo for the estate sale and moved on.

An avid, lifetime member of the National Geographic Society, Tony had also compiled a massive bookshelf full of every National Geographic magazine ever published. Each issue was methodically catalogued in chronological order, and the estate manager thought he might be able to put the whole lot up for sale as a set, or perhaps donate it to a library. A few issues had been set aside, so he flipped through them to see if they were in good enough shape to sell. He soon realized that some of them were in pretty bad shape, having been sliced and diced beyond repair. One issue that had been completely decimated included an article that dealt with couples who had been cast out from their own families and societies for daring to cross religious boundaries. The photographs had been cut out, but the captions highlighted the subjects: a Buddhist and a Hindu, a Christian and a Muslim, a Sikh and a Baha'i. Some had apparently been photographed in hiding, fearing persecution for departing from their dogmas and customs.

Another issue that had been torn apart was a special printing called "The Race Issue". A number of pages had been clipped out, most of which came from an article presenting a diverse portrait series of mixed couples who had tied the knot outside the New York City clerk's office.

Both sets of portraits had ended up on Tony's wall, aligned with the nationalities, races, and religions cited in the articles. As it turned out, the photographs had struck quite a chord with Tony and got him thinking: Had there ever been a Greek-Ugandan marriage? A Mexican-Hungarian marriage? An Icelandic-Laotian marriage? He wasn't a very experienced internet user, but inspired by the article, he had gone online and started searching. Every time he looked for a missing square, he found a couple who fit the description. Sometimes he found photos online; if not, he had often tried contacting couples directly, asking them if they would be willing to help him with his project.

He hadn't ever tweeted anything himself, but in the process of his research, Tony had also run across a Twitter campaign called #ThankyouLovings in which mixed couples had posted portraits of themselves. The campaign had been inspired by a movie about the Lovings, the real couple who

had sued the state of Virginia to get their interracial marriage recognized. Related drives on Facebook and other social media outlets had likewise garnered a massive archive of mixed couples. Tony had collected as many images as he could find over the years, replacing each red square on his full-size charts with a real couple's portrait.

Health issues had restricted Tony's travels later in life, and post-retirement, single life had left him with a great deal of free time to tackle this ambitious project. It ended up taking him several years, but he finally completed his charts. Looking them over with the hindsight of the decades that had passed since his chance meeting with Gina, the fact that he had previously led himself to believe that God's blessing rested only along a narrow, diagonal band of those charts seemed ludicrous.

Tony realized that many of the policies, statements, and advice that had previously been issued by the Church under false pretexts had never been rescinded. He could never understand why there was such a great hesitation to complete the reversal. The National Geographic Society had likewise banned black members from full fellowship. But their *Race Issue* included an admission of wrong-doing and an apology. Nobody was trying to change history or claim that it never happened, or worse, that it wasn't their fault because someone else made them do it. They were sorry, they were trying to change, and thanks to that trajectory, Tony had no problem presenting himself as a modern-day member of their society. He couldn't grasp his own church's reluctance to do the same, and eventually felt a bit embarrassed to present himself as a member of a latter-day club that seemed stuck in a former era.

In any case, he hoped his charts might help instill in anyone who visited him the overall message that we're all in this together. In light of his charts, skin tone seemed like such an arbitrary variable in a couple's aim for happiness; the idea that metaphorical references equating dark and light to badness and goodness had anything whatsoever to do with skin pigment seemed *juvenile* to put it in Elder Brown's words. The fact that a non-matching hue had been paraded around as an insurmountable obstacle by his own church leaders over the years seemed particularly disturbing.

One of the articles he had read in the *Race Issue* embarrassed and deeply upset him. The article was entitled, "There's no Scientific Basis for Race – it's a Made-Up Label."

The subtitle stated, "It's been used to define and separate people for millennia. But the concept of race is not grounded in genetics."

With no scientific basis for racial classifications, the fact that his own charts even used those categories felt a bit sickening to Tony. The article included references to the unfounded ideas that had kept slavery alive for centuries along with the anti-Semitism that his own father had combatted overseas just a generation before. As he read the article, he realized how misguided his own prejudices had been, and that the race-based ideas that had been promoted from the pulpit had been completely off base. There was as little justification for the idea of putting up racial barriers during the civil rights movement in the United States as there had been for classifying Jews as sub-human during the Nazi heyday.

The more he read about genetics, the more infuriated he got. In the end he concluded that if the LDS Church held the keys of the priesthood in the latter days, the restoration that ended the Great Apostasy must have occurred in 1978. Nobody should have held the priesthood at all until that year, because – as Tony came to realize through his reading – we're all of African descent! Those who claimed to hold the priesthood prior to that day must have been mere posers and counterfeit wannabes, because a supposedly divine ban on those of African descent would technically apply to every homo sapiens on this planet.



Tony wasn't the only one who had been using supposedly inspired words about made-up labels to limit the choice of a life partner; he knew of many others who had denied true love based on the dose of UV rays that their ancestors had been exposed to. What a crock! It all seemed so obvious in hindsight. Of course it's irrelevant! The regret Tony felt was channeled into his portrait projects, and as he kept pasting new portraits onto his charts, the word *made up* in the title of the National Geographic article kept haunting him. If a "made-up" label can be applied from the pulpit by a prophet claiming to speak for God, what else might be *made up*? Suddenly one day while he stood staring at his living room wall, it all made sense to him at once. That made-up card in the bottom row had never been there in the first place. It had been an illusion all along. As his imaginary house of cards toppled to the ground, he went through the sad realization that his stubborn, unquestioning zeal had limited his life's perspective during his lifetime of church service.

If race didn't matter in the first place, surely the Creator of the human race knew that. And if that Creator was funnelling information through a Rocky-Mountain mouthpiece, shouldn't that equality have been relayed as one of the key, fundamental principles to fight for, come what may? In the past, Mormons had been able to stand up against the adopted system; instead of being ostracized for ideas like polygamy, which after all was the Mormons' attempt to get the rest of the world to relax their marital classification system, couldn't those efforts have included dropping race-based restrictions as well as numerical limits on spouses?

Instead, the battle had been fought on the wrong side of the front, and Tony began to see the LDS position on the matter as geriatric stubbornness, driven not by inspiration, but by limited exposure and the fear of losing control over what had been comfortable up to that point. Truth itself had been entirely lost from the equation. The fundamental truth around the equality of the races hadn't been channelled down to the foot soldiers through the chain of command; it took the masses to push the message up to the Commander-in-Chief. With this wider perspective, Tony's new formula now had to account for the effects of indoctrination and subordination. No matter how he rearranged the terms, his re-written equation kept converging on the same two-word answer.

Now Tony had been raised not to swear, and there wasn't anybody around to hear it when it all hit him, but this one time in his life he let it fly:

"Holy \$&@%, it's **made up!**" he shouted out loud, although nobody was around to hear him, "It's %^\$#@ **made up!**"

Tony died wondering whether anything he had been taught had actually been passed along from God, if there even was such a thing. But he also died grateful for the eye-opening perspective that had shattered his former beliefs and prejudices. He maintained a conviction that grass-roots efforts actually mattered and could spark a positive change. He could also walk down the street and see everyone as equal; regardless of nationality or color or creed, he could genuinely accept the validity of that person's background and beliefs. And for that he was grateful to the end.

Tony had called his project *Interwoven*; and the finished product did, indeed, look like a tapestry. Many of the full-resolution photos can be viewed with the hashtag #ThankyouLovings. His estate manager posted his photo of the charts to the hashtag, which prompted a resurgence of interest and awareness. Tony's chart of nationalities included fifty random countries with 2,500 portraits; the complete matrix has over 40,000 cells which are gradually filling online as social media campaigns help spread the word. It may take years, but the finished tapestry will serve as a memorial to all of those affected by bigotry and intolerance and to all who joined Tony in his cause of undoing the damage of a defunct dogma.

twitter.com/hashtag/thankyoulovings?lang=en

Home Moments #thankyoulovings

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Loving @lovingthefilm · 6 Dec 2016  
Fans everywhere are sharing their stories and saying #ThankYouLovings! How have the Lovings impacted you and your family? #ThisIsLoving



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SKIN DEEP: THE SCIENCE OF RACE    DAWN OF THE WHITE MINORITY    US AND THEM: WHY WE DIVIDE    DRIVING WHILE BLACK

SPECIAL ISSUE

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

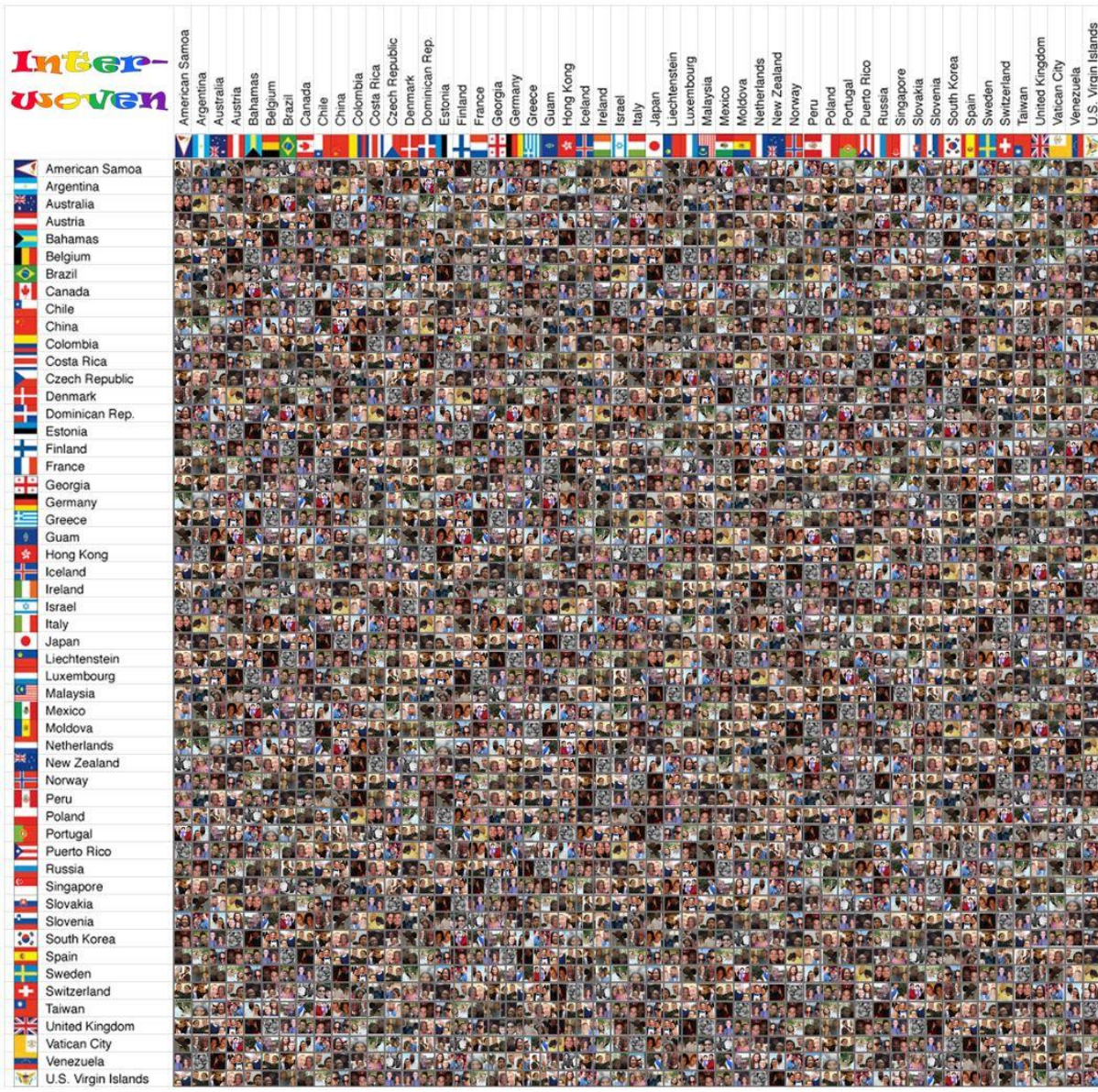


Black and White

These twin sisters make us rethink everything we know about race

APRIL 2016

WHAT'S YOUR STORY? #IDoItToo





Taking it back to Nathan's question: If you were Tony back in 1964, walking past that trash can in the Cairo Airport, what would you do? Given his beliefs and his support for the official church policies at the time, what should he have done?

Weren't there exceptions to the rule? After all, there was at least *one* exception to the priesthood ban back in Joseph Smith's day. Couldn't Tony have considered his situation to be an exception and pursued a relationship driven by love and unrestricted by nationality, asking for customized guidance to his unique, personal plight? Elder Packer acknowledged that there are indeed exceptions to his rule against interracial and international unions, but conveniently added, "I don't ask to be an exception." A true follower like Tony would take that advice and fall in line.

Well, in hindsight we can now see that we are all exceptions, because the rule itself was phony. So how about today? Would a person's religion figure into your decision or into your advice to your own children in choosing a partner? Would it make a difference whether a new love interest was Buddhist, or Hindu, or an atheist?

An unfortunate by-product of exclusive religions is the inability to conceive of the possible validity of alternative viewpoints. In reality, none of us really knows anything about what may or may not come next, and if we could truly appreciate our own ignorance on the matter, a cross-religion relationship could actually be viewed as a positive thing. Rather than the inevitable grief and sorrow that Elder Brown predicts in his teachings, children raised with that sort of tolerance and open-mindedness could learn to appreciate the beauty of both perspectives and be better armed to make decisions about what to adopt as their own life philosophy.

But in reality, I guess I would have to concede that if each partner in a relationship believes that their own dogma provides the only keys to heaven, and that their kids would be locked out for following their partner's religion, well than yes, sadly, I would say they have no business having kids. Or even being a couple. If you're Mormon, this is the point where you either send in the missionaries or call it quits right then and there at the airport. In my eyes, though, the problem with interfaith relationships is not the fact that the couple come from differing religious backgrounds; the problem is the exclusive claims of the religions themselves. Can we stop already with that nonsense!

My own grandfather fell for a Catholic girl and spent years of his life writing a book about the fallacy of Catholicism in an attempt to win her over. In the process he held regular meetings with the Catholic Archbishop, got entwined in Bruce R. McConkie's press battles on the matter, and met with the Mormon prophet and a number of apostles to try to get his book published and distributed as a missionary tract. The title of his book was "Concerning God," but a more accurately descriptive title would have been, "Why the Catholics are wrong and we Mormons are right." The effort was doomed from the beginning; he was never going to leave his religion, and she was never going to leave hers. They ended up parting ways with this impasse.

Could they have had a happy relationship as a couple? I doubt it. Not with the prevalent claims of exclusivity at the time. But by the time my own grandkids consider their life partners, I would hope that the deconstruction of untenable truth claims will have dismantled the gated communities and private drives that religions have concocted for themselves. And hopefully future publicity and educational campaigns will continue to build on efforts like the *Race Issue* and the movie *Loving*, driving in the absurdity of using the color of your skin – or of your passports – to guide your next move. #ThisIsLoving!

| KEY:         |                 |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|--------------|-----------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|
| OK to marry  | Not OK to marry |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|              |                 |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Buddhism     | ✓               | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Christianity | ✗               | ? | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Confucianism | ✗               | ✗ | ✓ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Hinduism     | ✗               | ✗ | ✗ | ✓ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Islam        | ✗               | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✓ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Judaism      | ✗               | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✓ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Sikhism      | ✗               | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✓ | ✗ | ✗ |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Taoism       | ✗               | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✓ | ✗ |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Unaffiliated | ✗               | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✓ |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

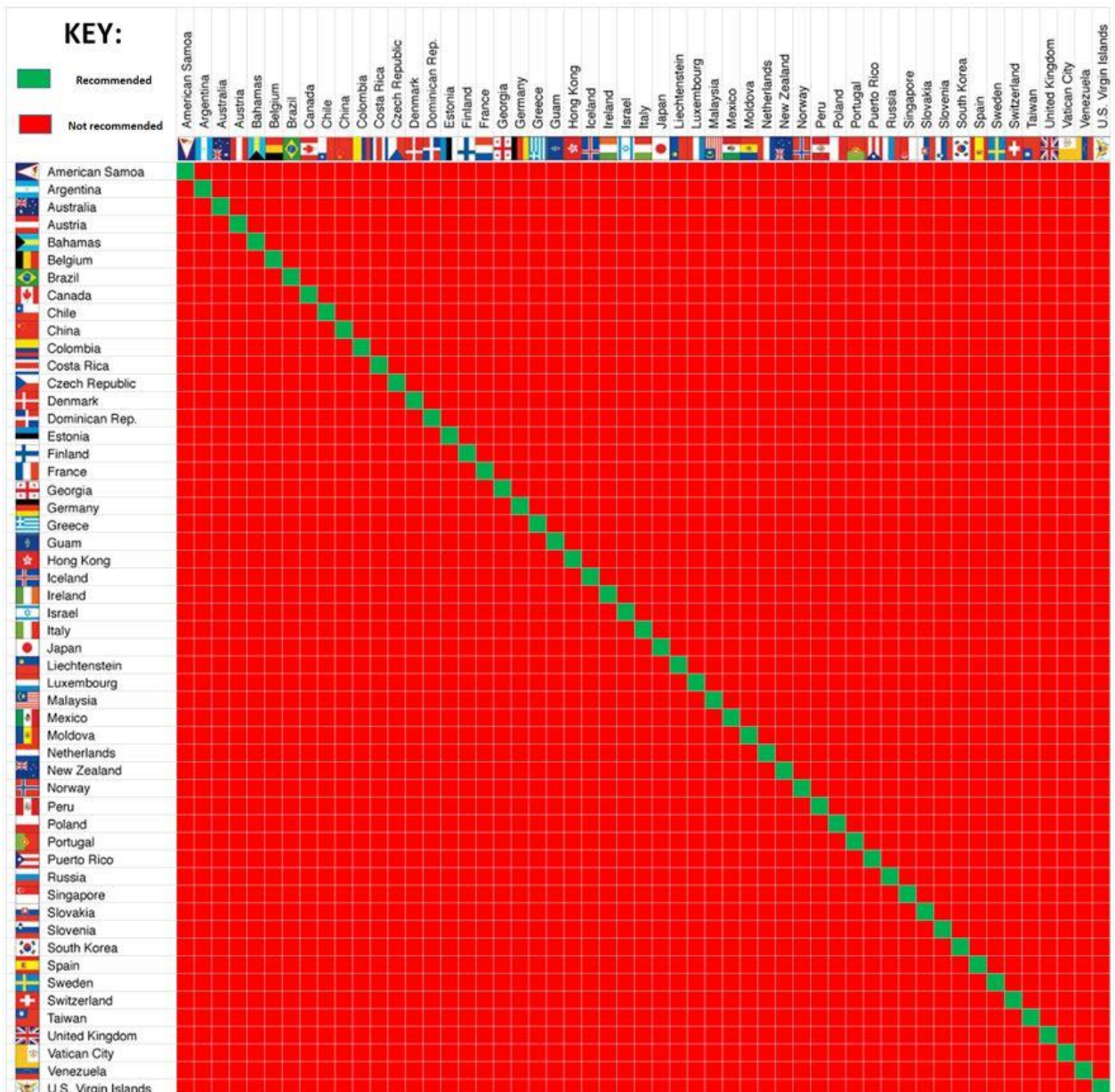
| KEY:         |                 |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|--------------|-----------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|
| OK to marry  | Not OK to marry |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|              |                 |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Buddhism     | ✓               | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Christianity | ✗               | ? | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Confucianism | ✗               | ✗ | ✓ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Hinduism     | ✗               | ✗ | ✗ | ✓ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Islam        | ✗               | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✓ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Judaism      | ✗               | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✓ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Sikhism      | ✗               | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✓ | ✗ | ✗ |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Taoism       | ✗               | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✓ | ✗ |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Unaffiliated | ✗               | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✓ |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

| KEY:          |                 |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|---------------|-----------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|
| OK to marry   | Not OK to marry |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|               |                 |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Anglican      | ✓               | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Baptist       | ✗               | ✓ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Catholic      | ✗               | ✗ | ✓ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Jehovah's Wts | ✗               | ✗ | ✗ | ✓ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| LDS           | ✗               | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ? | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Lutheran      | ✗               | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✓ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Methodist     | ✗               | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✓ | ✗ | ✗ |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Pentacostal   | ✗               | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✓ | ✗ |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Presbyterian  | ✗               | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✓ |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

| KEY:          |                 |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|---------------|-----------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|
| OK to marry   | Not OK to marry |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|               |                 |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Anglican      | ✓               | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Baptist       | ✗               | ✓ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Catholic      | ✗               | ✗ | ✓ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Jehovah's Wts | ✗               | ✗ | ✗ | ✓ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| LDS           | ✗               | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ? | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Lutheran      | ✗               | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✓ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Methodist     | ✗               | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✓ | ✗ | ✗ |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Pentacostal   | ✗               | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✓ | ✗ |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Presbyterian  | ✗               | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✓ |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

|                     | KEY:                   |                       | African | Asian | European | Hispanic/<br>Latino | Middle<br>Eastern | Native<br>American | Pacific<br>Islander |
|---------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|---------|-------|----------|---------------------|-------------------|--------------------|---------------------|
|                     | ✓ acceptable<br>to God | ✗ offensive<br>to God |         |       |          |                     |                   |                    |                     |
| African             | ✓                      | ✗                     | ✗       | ✗     | ✗        | ✗                   | ✗                 | ✗                  | ✗                   |
| Asian               | ✗                      | ✓                     | ✗       | ✗     | ✗        | ✗                   | ✗                 | ✗                  | ✗                   |
| European            | ✗                      | ✗                     | ✓       | ✗     | ✗        | ✗                   | ✗                 | ✗                  | ✗                   |
| Hispanic/<br>Latino | ✗                      | ✗                     | ✗       | ✓     | ✗        | ✗                   | ✗                 | ✗                  | ✗                   |
| Middle<br>Eastern   | ✗                      | ✗                     | ✗       | ✗     | ✓        | ✗                   | ✗                 | ✗                  | ✗                   |
| Native<br>American  | ✗                      | ✗                     | ✗       | ✗     | ✗        | ✓                   | ✗                 | ✗                  | ✗                   |
| Pacific<br>Islander | ✗                      | ✗                     | ✗       | ✗     | ✗        | ✗                   | ✗                 | ✓                  | ✗                   |



## My Reality: Selma

*Might be a coward but I've never been tested,  
I'd like to think that if I was I would pass.  
It makes me wonder if I better knock on wood,  
...which makes me wonder if I could."*

– Adapted from the Bosstones

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Years before the Northern Ireland massacre that U2 memorialized in their song *Sunday Bloody Sunday*, America had its own “Bloody Sunday” in Alabama. Just hours after the violent suppression of the first Selma to Montgomery march on Sunday March 7, 1965, Martin Luther King, Jr. issued a desperate plea for help. In a blitz of telegrams and public statements, he sent out an appeal that night “calling on religious leaders from all over the nation to join us on Tuesday in our peaceful, non-violent march for freedom.”

I don’t know if the call for help was received at LDS Church headquarters in Salt Lake City; then-President David O. McKay was certainly no friend of the civil rights movement, so I wouldn’t be surprised if he had deliberately been left off of Dr. King’s recipient list. But even if the message was indeed received by LDS leaders, it seems to have been largely ignored. Mobilizing a substantial number of cross-country marchers in that short a timeframe may have been a bit challenging, but perhaps possible. Unfortunately, we’ll never know since the call never went out publicly in Utah; the local rallies of support that had been organized in other western states were conspicuously absent in the Beehive State.

Less than 40 hours after the media appeal, the Alabama marchers set off from Selma once more – this time joined by several notable white preachers who had responded to the call; but yet again, they had to stop short of their goal of reaching Montgomery.

After the beating death that night of one of the white preachers who had stood arm in arm with them, the leaders of the movement decided to regroup. They scheduled the third attempt for a few weeks later; the additional time allowed even more marchers to answer the call for help, many of them galvanized by news of the deaths of both black and white activists who were uniting for the same cause.

Perhaps everyday Utahns can be excused for sitting out the first two marches given the timeframes and general lack of publicity in the Utah press. There was no ignoring the media storm

around the third march, however, and the date would have allowed plenty of preparation time for any supporters of the cause in Utah to make their way to Alabama. Perhaps a few responded, but apparently not enough to make the news reports. What did make the news reports, however, was a march to be held on the same day as the third Selma march in Salt Lake City itself.

The local march would allow supporters in the mountain west to demonstrate their solidarity with the movement without having to travel to the other end of the country. While the marchers in Montgomery made their final push to the Alabama State Capitol, a small group of marchers in Salt Lake gathered with their own destination in sight.

What is unique about the Utah march – in contrast to other coincident marches being held across the country as a show of support for the Southern marchers – is that the march in Salt Lake City was not aimed at the government. The marchers did not set out for Capitol Hill; instead, the Salt Lake march was aimed against the Mormon Church and their refusal to support civil rights. The destination was not a government building, but rather the Church Office Building that was still under construction next to Temple Square.

The marchers had selected their destination recognizing that the politics of the state were driven by the LDS Church. Press coverage, though, was also largely controlled by the LDS Church, and the marchers were generally shunned and ignored by the local media. One national magazine, however, did pick up on the march. *Jet*, a national magazine that was marketed toward African-American readers, published the following article on March 25, 1965:

RELIGION

Clerics Call Alabama 'Cradle Of Hell'
Seven New York ministers, returning from Selma, declared: "We were not only in the cradle of the Confederacy (as Alabama calls itself). We were in the cradle of hell." Rev. William A. Jones, spokesman for the group, called for federal troops to protect Negroes attempting to register as voters in Alabama.

Utah Negroes March Against Mormon Church

Negroes in Salt Lake City, Utah, marched on offices of the Mormon Church demanding the denomination back fair housing and fair employment measures before the state legislature.

Leaders: Top personnel in the *Ebony* subscription drive at Emmanuel Baptist Church in Chicago were (sitting, l-r) Essie Mae Wheeler, Mrs. Shirley Mitchell and Louis E. Blount, and (standing, l-r) Wilson Coppins, Margaret East, Rev. Major Robinson, Mrs. Mattie Fisher, Johnnie Diggs, Lillie Hawthorne and Mrs. Mary Gaines. They display Oneida silverware prizes.



One of Martin Luther King's most famous speeches was delivered that night after 25,000 marchers reached Montgomery. Knowing there was still a long and painful battle ahead, he asked over and over again in his speech, "How long?"

http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc_address_at_the_conclusion_of_selma_march/index.html

The answer to that question lay in the hearts of everyday Americans and their willingness to support or oppose the cause.

If you were alive at the time, where did you stand? Or if it was before your time, where did your parents stand? And where do you think you would have stood had you heard Dr. King's passionate speech that day? Recognizing that my own kids will look back on the pivotal moments that occurred during my lifetime and wonder where I stood, I recently asked my own parents – who were both BYU students at the time – whether the marches made the student news. Neither could remember specifically.

So what about me? Since the Selma marches were before my time, my exposure to the events comes only from books and movies. If I take a movie like *Selma*, I have to ask myself which character would I have been:



I'd like to think I would have dropped everything on hearing MLK's initial plea, and that I would have joined the marchers, holding fast to the "iron road" while enduring the mockery of the great and spacious crowds – to put a spin on some Mormon imagery. In hindsight, I think we all wish we were that valiant. In reality, though, most people tend to just follow orders and traditions, and unfortunately for many Mormons of the day, that included sustaining the bigotry rather than fighting it.

In response to the momentum of Dr. King's rallies, in fact, LDS leaders dug in their heels even further in opposition to the movement.

Effectively silencing a few notable exceptions within their own ranks, LDS apostle Ezra Taft Benson took to the pulpit during an ensuing general conference of the Church to warn the world of the danger posed by what he referred to as the "so-called civil rights movement." In his eyes, and in the words of his general conference address, the marchers and other activists were part of a devious political plot devised by Satan himself to destroy society. Reports of injustice and police brutality were "manufactured false stories" – fake news – and should be dismissed.

Elder Benson's words were canonized into LDS doctrine and spoken "in the name of Jesus Christ". During that conference, it is reported that all Mormons in attendance – which would have also included my own parents – unanimously put their hands to the square, confirming their adherence to his prophetic words and his role as a mouthpiece of God on earth. When he closed his speech with an "Amen?" the audience answered aloud, "Amen!"

Whether or not every-day Mormons actually bought into these malicious ideas being preached from the pulpit, I guess I'll never know. But if the sustaining vote was unanimous, can they be excused for their tacit complicity in the promotion of biased remarks? And with my own answer to that question resting on the tip of my tongue, before I lash out and point fingers, can I be excused for my own inaction against current discriminatory policies practiced by the LDS Church?

I was born into a church that would not allow black members to participate in ordinances that according to the Church were required for salvation. I was only seven years old when that policy was reversed, but can I honestly say at what point I would have openly opposed the policy had it stood in place through my teens, twenties, thirties, or beyond?

The 1978 reversal of the policy is seen as a watershed moment in the Church. But it fell tremendously short with its ambiguity. Although the “Official Declaration #2” that was read into scripture reversed specific practices, it included no explanation or reversal of the doctrine behind it. Most Mormons believed that the priesthood ban had been the will of God, but nobody seemed to know why it had been implemented in the first place. And for the next 35 years, Mormons were left guessing, guided by over a century of very embarrassing explanations by a string of Church leaders.

Finally on December 6th, 2013 what in my eyes is an even more significant declaration was issued in the form of an [online essay published by the LDS Church](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/race-and-the-priesthood) (<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/race-and-the-priesthood>). Although the essay carried huge implications for the church, it seemed to get largely ignored, and as far as I could tell, most church members never read it. Although I never heard the landmark position even mentioned in church, in my case it marked one of the major turning points for my own adherence to Mormonism, leading toward my eventual departure.

The essay answered all of the mystery surrounding the reasons behind the promotion of racism in the past. The lengthy explanations that had been offered over the years were all dismissed. Those who had promoted racist ideas – even when spoken by the President of the Church in the supposed name of Jesus Christ – had been incorrect. They were just plain wrong!

Of course! At heart it is so obvious, but somehow I had deluded myself into thinking that there was some other reasoning at work. But no – according to the essay, Church leaders had simply been incorrectly swayed by the culture and customs of the day. Their words had nothing to do with God in this instance; in fact, these words countered God’s will, leading those who accepted them away – or astray if you will – from truly Christian teachings.

For me, the emancipation that ran through my soul on reading this admission was like a chain of dominoes that toppled every other Mormon practice that had made me uncomfortable over the years. I know others understood it differently, but the message I took from the essay was that anything preached from the pulpit today can be reversed by tomorrow’s Official Declaration #3.

Policies, doctrines, and practices that discriminate against women, LGBTQ members, truth-seekers, or anybody else, for example, may be rescinded with a single, official blog post. The threat posed by these groups – just like Elder Benson’s misguided admonitions against the civil rights movement – may have simply been fabricated by the internal fears of church leaders rather than inspired by a loving God. To me, that’s what they were saying with this essay – without actually saying it...or admitting any wrong-doing.

Will there be a future online essay condemning the policy that excludes children in same sex households from participation in church ordinances and activities? Will we be told that exclusion of women from church administration was simply due to the ideas of men – having nothing whatsoever to do with God? Will the strict adherence to the historicity of LDS scriptures be dismissed, allowing doubters to worship with their families with an absence of hypocrisy or hostility? If so, will those who adhered to these policies or silently and reluctantly supported them be forced to come up with their own excuses for having been deceived or for having held their tongues?

The LDS apostle Bruce R. McConkie – whose own racist ideas continue to be mistaken for Mormon Doctrine around the world thanks to his admittedly misnamed book – is cited in the essay as claiming that “new light and knowledge” can always erase previous “limited understanding.” Well that’s one process I can agree with and that I expect to continue: Previous changes now help me view current practices – and those who take a hard-line stance on them – with reserved scepticism. To me, the 2013 essay validates the expectation that further change will continue and invalidates those who make claims concerning the eternal effectiveness of ill-conceived policies, concocting makeshift excuses for their implementation. Sometimes there simply is no excuse!

My take on this particular essay is that Mormons can claim the right to question everything, even if it has been said from the pulpit. Bottom line: Follow your conscience first!

While the essay was illuminating and emancipating for me, however, it was frustrating at the same time in that it fell tremendously short of taking any sort of responsibility for the promotion and implementation of racist ideology in the past. The essay effectively condemns certain, previously promoted ideas, but leaves other intact. If we were wrong as a church, shouldn’t we go further?

Basically, the essay said, “We don’t understand why God wanted us to withhold the full rights of Church membership from blacks.”

Say what? So despite all of the concessions about racism being wrong, the essay still shockingly implies that the ban was God’s will, absolving any Mormon who stood behind the ban of any moral responsibility for the resulting discrimination. Since we’ve already gone so far as to say that the opinions and attitudes that preceded and justified the ban had nothing to do with God, why on earth should anyone believe that the ban itself was anything other than misguided?

Oh yes, that would have meant we were “led astray.” And the prophet *cannot* lead the church astray according to so many direct quotes spoken from the Tabernacle pulpit. So it must have been God’s will rather than each sitting prophet’s narrow-minded bias.

“Now wait a second,” says the apologist, “You can’t just take your ideals today and impose them on people in previous centuries. Things were different back then, and Mormons were just going along with the flow. We were just like everybody else!”

“True,” I would say; in fact, that is one of the main arguments in the essay. It acknowledges that Mormons – unfortunately – were *just like everybody else* back then. But if we say that, then we can’t claim that Mormon leaders of the day spoke for God. They were...well, just like everybody else!

According to the 2013 essay, church leaders were not doing God’s will with the racist teachings that led up to the ban, but when they proposed, implemented, and sustained it over a century of time, their successors *were* supposedly doing God’s will...and awaiting an act of God to change course? With the admission that all the reasoning that was used to support it in the first place is false, shouldn’t church leaders have been expected to undo that policy on their own without the need for divine intervention?

It seems very similar to the dilemma faced by German Latter-Day Saints in the 1930’s, who had to argue that “God wanted us to go along with Hitler....that is, until Hitler declared war on the Promised Land, then God expected us to oppose him...but to do so silently and to fight reluctantly in his army, because Mormons are scripturally bound to be patriotic.”

The survival of the church has often been cited as the reason for the German Saints’ complicity with national socialism – under the assumption that overt objection would have led to a

crackdown that would have destroyed the church and almost a century of missionary efforts. But in hindsight, instead of excommunicating dissidents like Helmuth Hübener, those truly wishing to do God's will probably should have stood boldly for the truth all along the way even if that meant being wiped out as a church in German-controlled territory. Now that's easy enough for me to say from my comfortable, modern-day position; but if I don't even have the fortitude to publicly take a stand against current discrimination practiced by the LDS Church, can I really claim that I would have stood up for anything at all in Nazi Germany while facing the prospect of a death penalty for sedition?

This all brings me to my eye-opening bottom line, which is that Mormonism is just another religion. If commonality and context are the only factors that excuse the racism of the past, can't the same concession be made about today's mistakes? Is that admission really such a huge leap for Mormons? To me it seems a bit like a kid whose parents have told them all along just how special and unique they are...giving them the erroneous impression that they have been the favorite child. When they get the newsflash that their siblings were all told the same thing, is that so startling after all?

For those who think it is pretentious to judge 19th century people based on 21st century standards, yes, perhaps that is a bit unfair...so fine, I'll concede that point. But if you want to use the "historical context" excuse, you'll also need to admit that you're just another church. If you are going to claim to be in direct contact with Jesus Christ Himself – and if you're going to claim to be the only organization authorized to act on His behalf, representing His will on earth – then sorry, you don't get to use the excuse that everyone else is or was doing it.

There's an obvious answer here, and the volumes of pretexts that have been published can disappear from significance in an instant with a simple acknowledgment: We're all in the same boat; nobody has any more or less direct a connection to God than anybody else.

This realization shouldn't come as any surprise, but just as it shocked me to move around the world in my youth and come to the realization that America was just another country, finding out the same about my religion is likewise liberating and disconcerting at the same time.

We aren't God's gift to the world. If we ever were, we've blown it with this indiscretion and many more like it. So how do we make things right from here?

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### *The Seven R's*

If you go back to the Selma trailer and try to choose a character who might best embody the views of the LDS Church at the time, who would it be? I wish I could point to James Reeb or other northern preachers who locked arms with the other marchers, but shamefully in this instance I would have to go with either one of the local cops beating a protester, or a jeering spectator in the crowd shouting their approval of the repression. I wish I could at least point to the neutral bystanders locked inside their houses to avoid potential conflict, but in this particular battle, Temple Square was not Switzerland; LDS leaders picked a side – unfortunately, it was the wrong side.

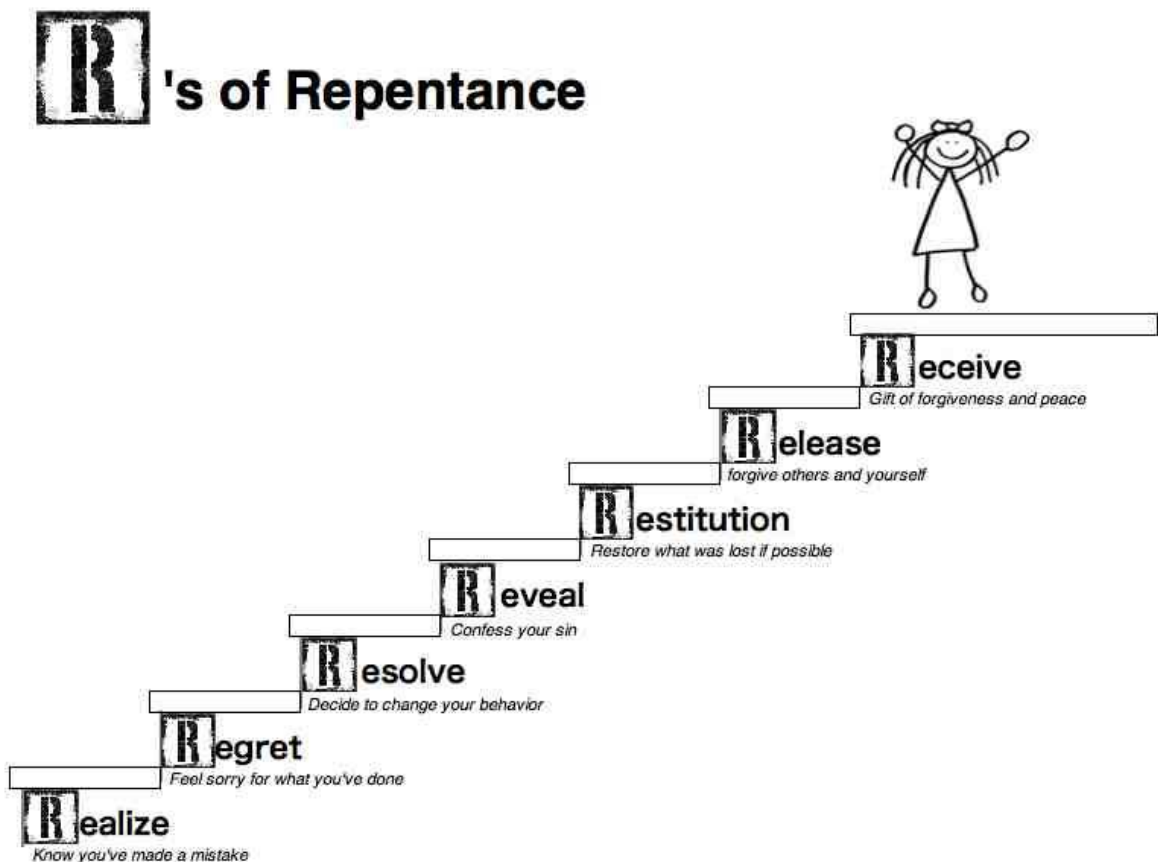
In this case, active Mormons had essentially been told that joining the marchers constituted joining the legions of Satan. So it is no surprise that neither the marchers in Montgomery nor those in Salt Lake City had much support from local Mormon congregations. A Satanic threat should be actively opposed and not just placidly ignored, after all. Was an active, God-fearing Mormon in 1965 really free to follow their conscience with this sort of rhetoric being preached from the pulpit?

I'd like to think that my parents opposed that dangerous and blatantly biased notion, standing against LDS Church policies where appropriate. Whatever the case, I wish that they and their fellow Mormon students would have heard the call and felt prompted to take a road trip to Selma to join the marchers – whatever the cost! But I can't answer for them; I can only answer for myself and try to make sure that I am on the right side of the police line now and in the future, recognizing that other political movements are passed off by LDS leadership nowadays as being driven by the dark side of the force.

When it comes to sweeping things under the carpet, I certainly can't point any fingers at anyone else, because I myself have tried to push the embarrassing issue of race and the priesthood aside. I have to admit that as a missionary, as a teacher, and as a parent, I have tried to dismiss racism and other potentially contentious topics that could be damaging to the reputation of the church, attempting to explain them away and move on to other topics as quickly as possible. I am ashamed at having used that evasive manoeuvre in the past; but that's exactly what I see the current essay attempting to do.

Simply brushing the issue aside is not disavowment, and I believe there is much, much more to be done in actively disavowing discrimination in all its forms. And today I believe this means standing against some of the current church policies such as the continued insistence on a divinely sanctioned racial ban and abhorrent discrimination against the LGBTQ community – whatever the cost!

Every LDS convert and primary child is supposed to learn about the steps of repentance. Here is one example:



The individual steps vary from lesson to lesson, but any LDS Sunday school or missionary lesson I have ever heard on the topic of repentance points to the idea that cessation of a practice alone is not repentance.

So how many of these steps are embodied in the 2013 LDS essay on race? I find it hard to put my finger on a single one! There is no call to action, and the prevalent racial atmosphere of the United States is provided as an excuse – presenting the Church like an innocent bystander who got sucked into a battle against their will. There is no acknowledgement that the LDS Church was instead actively promoting racist ideas while at the same time claiming to be the sole organization on the planet authorized to act on God’s behalf. There is no apology nor a single admission of wrong-doing at the top; following the chart above, you wouldn’t even be able to start climbing up the ladder without that recognition!

In claiming there is more to be done, I’m only regurgitating what I was taught about the repentance process in my German primary class back in the 1970s. Now the alliteration doesn’t work out quite as conveniently in German, but the ideas behind each step were the same. My scriptures, lesson manuals, teachers, and primary songs called the process “umkehren”, or literally “to turn around.”

Throwing it ahead another decade with the musical soundtrack that pops into my head when I hear the term *umkehren*, Falco’s 80s hit *Der Kommissar* included the line “Drah di net um oh oh oh” which was translated to “Don’t turn around, oh oh!” when *After the Fire* covered it for the U.S. market the next year.

Falco’s version includes the Austrian-dialect, imperative form of the infinitive verb “umdrehen” which is distinctly different from “umkehren”, even though both are German words for turning around. One is just revolving – facing a different direction – while the other involves forward momentum in the opposite direction.

When you’re driving a car, you would use “umdrehen” to describe turning your head around to look behind you. But if you wanted to actually turn your vehicle around and head in the opposite direction, you would use the word “umkehren.” When it comes to the process of repenting and how to actually go about changing the course of your life, the process is rightly called “umkehren”.

The Church essay perhaps got the meanings switched, adopting the alternative term that comprises spinning around in place without charting a new course.

We’re told in the essay that the Church disavows and unequivocally condemns racism in all its forms, past, present, and future. That’s awesome, but what does that actually mean? Does it mean we should deny, avoid, or ignore? Pretend it never happened? Ironically, the essay itself falls short of condemning what it claims to condemn. There is *umdrehen* without *umkehren*.

While the previous explanations for the priesthood ban are decried, for example, the official essay offers no alternative theory and avoids condemning the ban itself. So Mormons to this day are still left believing that its implementation was God’s will at the time. In reality, the ban had nothing to do with God and should never have been adopted in the first place. That’s the obvious truth, so why is that so hard to say? Why is that fourth step on the ladder so insurmountable?

The closer a misdeed hits home, the harder each step of the repentance ladder is to climb. In this case, we have to recognize that the essay’s “unequivocal” statement doesn’t just cover the condemnation of ideas promoted in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Joseph Smith and Brigham Young; it includes a chain of succession all the way through to Ezra Taft Benson – the man whose personal signature is

inscribed on my mission call to East Germany – along with everyone who ever sustained him as a prophet, seer, and revelator!

Oh wait, that includes me, too!

“Surely not I, Lord!”

During my first seven years on the planet while racial discrimination was officially implemented in the LDS Church, maybe I had the excuse of the ignorance of youth. But if the ban hadn’t been reversed, would I be defending it today and blaming it on God’s will? How will I ever know whether my supposed tolerance today is in fact genuine – as opposed to just going along with the prevailing system of authority that happens to be changing its tune?

Turning once again to the soundtrack in my head, and skipping ahead another decade, sometimes I ask myself the same questions as in this old 90s song:

*Have you ever had the odds stacked up so high,  
You need a strength most don't possess?  
Or has it ever come down to do or die?  
You've got to rise above the rest?*

*I'm not a coward I've just never been tested,  
I'd like to think that if I was I would pass,  
Look at the tested and think I might be a coward,  
I'm afraid of what I might find out.*

Maybe there’s a battle brewing that will test us all, so maybe I should knock on wood before I open my mouth; but when I watch MLK’s speeches, I wonder when I would have had enough – when I would have stood up and walked out while the presiding authority was telling me to sit down and shut up. How long would I have sustained the leaders with my arm to the square? In a similar way, I can look at Nazi Germany and wonder at what point I would have stood up for what was right even while the Church was telling me to close my eyes, bow my head, and state my affirmation.

Well, I wasn’t around to be tested in the 1930s or in the 1960s, so how will I ever know where I would have stood in that sort of “do-or-die” trial? I guess one way I can know for sure where I would have stood is that I have disagreed with the November Policy for over two years now, and so far I have only complained about it in private. That should tell me plenty about my own character. My complicit association with that policy is embodied in the mere fact that I failed to take a public stand against it.

Today that changes: as I write these words, I am doing so privately, alone at my computer. But if you are now reading these words, they somehow escaped from my private hard drive and made it out into the ether. And hopefully that means that I have managed to reach for the next rung on the repentance ladder.

So what would the next rung be for the LDS Church as a whole? Well, how about this for a start:

“The ban was not inspired.”

Five words! What would that admission cost the organization? Yes, you could use that concession to justify a more liberal interpretation of today’s prophetic advice. Is that what the essay’s authors were afraid of? Would droves leave the Church over it? Or is it simply a fear of losing

control over the remaining membership, who would then be free to pick the palatable pieces from the menu and leave the indigestible items in the kitchen – or in the trash bin where they belong?

Isn't that already the case? Plenty of misguided doctrines have been rescinded in the past; in fact, if the views of previous prophets were still in force today, we would be dismissing every BYU professor in a physical science as a heretic for teaching the current understanding of geology, anthropology, biology, or linguistics. The Church has acknowledged so many other changes – none of which resulted in widespread pandemonium.

So why is this one so different? In my eyes, the price they have chosen to pay for this stubborn refusal to cede their indefensible position is much higher than a white flag would have been: what they have sacrificed in the process is the integrity of millions of church members who have to somehow rationalize the absurdity of an inspired ban, dreaming themselves up an arbitrarily exclusive elasti-God in the process!

The refusal to yield that last patch of ground has only made the steps of the repentance ladder higher, breaking the souls of those affected in the process, as evidenced by the heartbreak and outrage that was expressed when the long-awaited apology was finally issued – but turned out to be a [cruel hoax](#).

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Tapestry

The Church essay focuses on the priesthood ban, but that is only one aspect of racism within Mormonism; perhaps some additional essays will be published in the future to address other racist practices like the opposition to interracial marriage. Under the false assumption that skin pigment somehow automatically reflects cultural conflicts, divergent traditions, or other supposedly insurmountable hurdles for happy unions, incessant advice from the pulpit has steered toward a culture of segregated selection in dating and marriage..

The current essay stays silent on the issue of interracial marriage, other than implying that any opposition to interracial marriage was simply adherence to the laws of the land at the time. In reality, church leaders openly and actively opposed the practice, promoting the protection of those very laws and objecting to their repeal long after the political tide had turned. The continuing failure to address this issue can lead to a belief among Mormons that the prophetic mandates to avoid interracial marriage are still in place. Instead of recognizing that, “the times they are a changing,” it seems the Church has been marching to the drumbeat of another 1960s anthem: “You keep saming when you ought to be changing.”

For many years, practicing, active, temple-attending church members were stripped of their temple recommends if they entered into interracial marriages. Believe it or not, even this was a huge step forward from the supposedly figurative death penalties proclaimed by Brigham Young as punishment for the practice. Of course I disavow those brutal teachings, as does the modern LDS Church. But there has been utter silence concerning the perhaps more benign but equally offensive spiritual threats on the subject issued by Brigham Young's successors – who likewise claimed to speak for God. Silence is not disavowment! Even if the pre-1978 mandates have since been informally downgraded to mere recommendations or guidance, that advice has never been repealed or formally renounced. The lack of condemnation of previously issued warnings against the practice of interracial marriage suggests that the policies are still actively in place today.

Tony's hypothetical predicament was complicated by real, segregating statements that we don't hear much of today. Well, luckily we don't have to live with 1960s-era biases anymore, so let's fast forward forty years. Is the LDS Church still promoting the same ideas nowadays?

It sure seems so to me. Current LDS President Russel M. Nelson, for example, has condoned being "color blind" in most aspects of life, but has stated that racial discretion and being "united in ethnic background" is recommended when it comes to marriage. These are statements from the sitting prophet, who has told young single adults to marry into their own race. My kids might think I'm ancient history, but I met this man, and lacking any statements to the contrary, his direction sure feels like the Church's current view to me. President Nelson filled the apostolic vacancy created by Elder Petersen, who fathered conversion therapy in Church institutions, derided Martin Luther King, Jr., and uttered nonsensical warnings against even the slightest black-and-white social interaction. This from the current prophet's own predecessor; we are not that far removed from those false ideologies!

If we as a church are truly disgusted with Elder Petersen's position on these topics, as I believe we should be, let's embark on a path of true repentance which ought to include actions along a reverse course. Or if President Nelson truly believes that God still condones these restrictions, and that he alone speaks for God, then he should shout his objection to mixed marriages from the rooftops, dealing with any public backlash it may create; if he's right, wouldn't he be blessed ten-fold for upholding God's will in the face of perceived persecution? Instead we are left with silence and its implied endorsement of outdated edicts. Enough already!

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### *Loving*

Now let's go back to the "Loving" trailer to see the real impacts of the ideas being preached by Elder Petersen and his predecessors.

Of the fifty or so people shown in the trailer, which characters were doing God's will?

Let's talk about the cop at 0:45 in particular. How about him? Was he doing God's will when he broke into Richard and Mildred's room while they were sleeping and arrested them? This really happened to the very real couple in the middle of the night. If you were a sworn officer, would you have followed the order to arrest them? Perhaps the cop was upholding the law of the land at the time, but was he doing God's will?





I would have to answer that with a big, fat, resounding, “No!”

But who am I? I certainly don't speak for God. So let's look for someone who does. The man who married my great grandmother's grandmother actually claimed to speak for God. What if we could ask him that same question? That Mormon prophet's name is on my resume; it goes with me everywhere I go. Every professional proposal I have sent out in the last twenty years has included Brigham Young's name under my qualifications. It is part of my LinkedIn profile and has formed part of my identity over the years. Now if I were to ask Brigham Young himself whether the cop was doing God's will, what do you think he would say?

I believe, like me, that he would say “No!” So does that mean we agree on this issue?

Absolutely not!

Why? Because in Brigham Young's opinion, the cop stopped well short of implementing God's will. In Brother Brigham's eyes, the cop actually defied God's will by simply arresting the Lovings – and by letting them live another day. Brigham Young, the proclaimed mouthpiece of God for the entire planet in his time, believed that interracial couples should be murdered in their sleep to pay for the crime of cohabitation and – God forbid – bringing mixed-race babies into the world!

“Well, of course he didn't mean that literally,” Brigham Young's supporters said back in 1866 when Thomas Coleman began to defy that prohibition – and actually *was* murdered in the same brutal way Brigham Young had dictated. I'm sorry, but even after looking at the lame justifications put forward by FAIRMormon and other apologists, I simply don't buy any of the excuses; in fact, those pathetic arguments and pompous rationalizations make me feel like I'm dealing with a sleazy lawyer rather than someone who actually wishes to *disavow* the practice of racism as the modern LDS Church does – albeit indirectly.

I too disavow and condemn Brigham Young's words on the subject – as well as the systemically racist policies he implemented – directly and absolutely. But is simply stating my disapproval enough to constitute disavowment? The ideas behind the racist policies are now rejected; isn't that enough? Why stir things up with painful memories of a bygone era? Can't we just move on and relegate these injustices to the contextual past? Well, if we back up and subject the system to the seven “R's” of the repentance ladder – and if we can agree that ignorance is not disavowment – some of the most critical rungs of the ladder are just plain missing from the process.

So what should we do about it today to help combat systemic racism and effect a genuine turnaround? Should I be doing more to actively distance myself from the practice of racist policies and from the teaching of racist ideologies that were previously promoted by an institution that forms a large part of my public identity? In the absence of any information to the contrary, many of my personal friends and professional colleagues would assume I would adhere to the official guidance of the Church, come what may. I'm guessing they would see me as a conformist who would put my hand to the square and confirm any policy that comes down the chain. I've always known that sort of adherence to be a potential risk – not knowing what might actually come down the chain – but it was a risk that I was willing to take given my faith that Church leaders would do the right thing. I've been that guy in the past, and I have gambled away my own integrity on that trust.

The failure to admit that the racist policies of the past were wrong, however, is a breach of that trust. Until that concession is offered, I would like to clearly distance myself from any trace of that sort of stubborn bigotry. Through much of my professional career, I have taken on the standard appearance of a BYU student – modelled after missionary guidelines for dress and grooming. Those

who know nothing about me other than the source of my university degree may take my former appearance as a sign that I wish to be a model Mormon. Over the last few years, I have deliberately chosen to avoid that sort of appearance as part of an effort to publicly distance myself from official church stances and to help spark conversations along those lines. People sometimes ask why a BYU graduate like me would have pierced ears, for example, noting the dichotomy. Every alumnus knows that I wouldn't have been able to take a single exam while wearing earrings, not to mention the beard or the tattoos. Well, in addition to the fact that I feel more comfortable with my appearance, I've decided to use these little pin pricks and burn marks as my outward sign that I disavow the previous racist, misogynist, deceptive, and homophobic policies and practices committed by the university's namesake and by their board over the years. Just as the standard missionary uniform gives missionaries a chance to speak up about their beliefs, I'm using my own new uniform to do the same, helping to trigger conversations and signal to others that I'm no longer on board. You can come up with your own ways of disavowing. This is one of mine.

Now when it comes to Brigham Young, I do feel the need to take it a bit further. The more of Brigham Young's opinions I run across, the more I'm convinced that someone picked up Donald Trump in a DeLorean, slapped a beard on him, and dropped him off in the crossroads of the Wild West. Everything I dislike about Trump's politics, demeanor, and leadership style I find in Brigham Young.

The fact that Young is called an "American Moses" in LDS publications is offensive to say the least. Moses was an emancipator of slaves. Brigham Young was no such thing. To dub him with the same name as Harriet Tubman must have her rolling in her grave.

Yes, there are some statements about his opposition to slavery, but much of that opposition was intended to prevent any interaction at all between blacks and whites, especially where illicit relationships might lead to offspring.

It makes my blood boil in any case to think that a man who advocated these sorts of practices – and claimed to be speaking for God in the process – is part of my own professional profile. That leads me to a few ideas about how to implement a process of true disavowment, in ascending order of personal impact:

- 1) Stop using Brigham Young's name on my social media profiles, resumes, and other personal documents.
- 2) Encourage others to do the same.
- 3) Formally renounce my degree from the university in protest.

I'd actually like to take it a bit further and implement additional steps culminating in renaming the university itself, but that's obviously out of my control. I doubt there would ever be enough support to push through a new name given the huge expense not to mention any resistance to the idea, but if Russell M. Nelson can dream a dream and then wake up to rebrand the entire Church, why not its university?

Now I understand that this proposal may sound a little extreme, but seriously, I would think that reading the quotes and events associated with Brigham Young in [this Wikipedia article](#) would make it hard for anyone who is tied to his name to adopt a personal policy of passive resistance to his mindset:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Interracial\\_marriage\\_and\\_The\\_Church\\_of\\_Jesus\\_Christ\\_of\\_Latter-day\\_Saints](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Interracial_marriage_and_The_Church_of_Jesus_Christ_of_Latter-day_Saints)

This is not biased, anti-Mormon rhetoric: both sides are presented without an agenda. Read it and substitute any name you wish for Brigham Young; then ask yourself if you would want to be associated with the name of a person who believed in the sorts of ideas he promoted. Ask yourself whether you'd be comfortable as an alumnus wearing a sweatshirt with "Brigham Young" written across the front when you are invited to dinner at a black friend's house.

No? Well, if you wouldn't wear it there, why wear it at all? In fact, as of today, August 1, 2017, I'll go ahead and take Step #1: I am deleting Brigham Young's name from my LinkedIn profile and I won't include it on my resume or on any other professional document I send out in the future. If anyone asks why, I won't need to point them any further than Wikipedia for the answer.

As for the other steps, I haven't decided when or even whether to take them. I'd be happy to get involved in a conditional, collective movement of some sort that invokes a change more effectively than my sole, squeaking little voice of protest. I don't even know if it's possible to voluntarily renounce a degree; and if so, I'm not sure whether that would automatically invalidate any subsequent degrees that were contingent on my BYU diploma. But what could I put out there as a condition? "I'm going to renounce my degree unless..." Unless what?

Unless the name of the university is changed? If enough people got on board, I guess I would join them in that sort of a demand. Gaining enough momentum for a wholesale name change might take a while, though, so maybe it would be worth starting with a smaller, conciliatory request that could be completed by the BYU webmaster in less than five minutes: How about a statement on the BYU website disavowing their namesake's racist rants? That might be a step in the right direction, perhaps convincing me to start putting *Brigham Young University* back on my credentials as the name of the institution while continuing to disavow the man's misguided opinions. But what would they care whether or not I choose to include the name on my profile? Honestly, I don't think anyone would; I mean, who am I anyway? Just some anonymous graduate from twenty-five years ago. But what if somebody well known, somebody they love to claim as their own decided to take that step? I do believe that could spark a change or at least enough publicity to make a point and raise awareness of the issue. So that's my challenge issued to any fellow alumnus with some clout: drop Brigham Young's name from your profile and see if anyone notices.

In any case, pretending Brigham Young never said these things by suppressing the distribution of his statements is not disavowment. As a university and as a church, we're still below the bottom rung of the ladder as far as I can tell.

Yes, lots of people were racist at the time, and the essay on the official Church website uses that rationalization again and again. I don't know if that excuses anyone else, but this man in particular claimed to speak for God on the issue, and I think that puts him in a unique category that can't be excused by the ambient mindset of the day. And when Brigham Young spoke on the subject of racism, it is clear that many faithful adherents stopped thinking for themselves and used his words to justify their own acquired racism.

I understand that one of his successors, George Albert Smith, wasn't happy that the quote, "When our leaders speak, the thinking has been done," appeared in a Church publication on his watch. Despite later retractions due to the uproar, that general attitude was prevalent enough for the quote to have been used by the Church's presiding bishopric, even if the church president did not condone that viewpoint himself. Regardless of his objection, President Smith certainly went right along with Brigham Young's racist tenets without thinking them through any further – or apparently asking God for guidance on the matter.

President Smith fell into the direct line of succession of those claiming the authority to convey God's word to their own generation. In his words – which his followers mistook for God's word – it wasn't good enough just to ban interracial marriage: any social interaction at all between the races should be prohibited because of the potential consequences of that contact leading to a date, an engagement, a marriage, or – God-forbid – children who could not be sealed to their parents! Whether or not he officially promoted blind obedience among his followers is irrelevant; over the years he and many other church leaders practiced their own blind obedience by unquestioningly sanctioning policies of segregation, and backing them up with hand-me-down explanations that modern Mormons are now told were utter hogwash – to put it mildly. Today's dismissals come from current church leaders who claim to be speaking for the same God as their predecessors. Following the precedent of that moving target, what will future leaders say about today's discriminatory policies and practices?

So when George Albert Smith was presiding over the Quorum of the Twelve that sustained Mark E. Petersen's appointment to their own ranks, were they admitting a ready-made bigot, or did Elder Petersen merely adopt President Smith's views as his own during his tenure, assuming the thinking had already been done? Their words on the subject of interracial marriage and related topics are nearly identical and are equally condemned by today's church leaders; in hindsight, it sure seems more like blind recitation than independent thought or supplication!

My own kids are a product of a long string of interracial and multinational marriages that include Italians, Germans, Prussians, Poles, Hungarians, Britons, Mexicans, Guatemalans, and on and on and on. I have a hard time condemning those unions, and when the LDS Church's essay says that all racism is to be condemned in "in any form," I would assume that statement would include a rejection of restrictions on interracial marriages – or any advice that even mentions the made-up notion of race as a factor in any selection process whatsoever, be it personal, professional, or religious.

In the end, I'd like to raise my own kids with more of a focus on falling in love and less attention to skin color and other physical factors in making decisions about commitment.

I have to admit I'd be worried if they brought home someone with strong, exclusive religious views that differed from their own. Perhaps it's too late to remove that factor for this current generation; but maybe by the time their own kids grow up, exclusive religious views will have been tossed onto the same trash heap as white supremacy, male dominance, conversion therapy, and other lies, leaving religion as significant a barrier to a relationship as whether someone belongs to Costco or Sam's Club.

Again, wouldn't it be nice if the additional perspective of mixing up viewpoints gave kids more ability to cope with life and make their own decisions? But unfortunately, adherents of many orthodox religions claim that heaven has no room for those who follow other paths.

Mormons in particular are stuck with scriptural passages claiming that there is "no other way," excluding those who adhere to any other religion – or even a different form of Christianity – from admittance through the pearly gates. Not just Mormons, but Christians of all denominations are faced with Christ's direct quote that "no one comes to the Father except through me." Some biblical passages are subject to interpretation, with meanings that can vary with the selected translation. But for this verse, every one of the hundred or so available English translations includes the exclusive term, "no one." Exceptions to this restrictive rule are non-existent, and the resulting

mentality of entitlement has fueled centuries of ostracism that brought on the crusades, the inquisition, the Lamanite missions, and other misguided quests.

What if the Costco membership contract included the clause, “Thou shalt not shop at Sam’s Club nor do anything like unto it”?

What if they went further and told you not to even drive through a neighborhood with a Sam’s Club or to touch a Sam’s Club catalog? What if Costco’s membership criteria excluded you from applying if you happen to live with anyone who holds a Sam’s Club card?

Absurd? Once you come to the conclusion that claims of Hebrew ancestry for Native Americans – and the accompanying directive to “whiten” them up with Christianity – is as made up as the pseudoscience of eugenics, the exclusivity of Mormon doctrine seems equally preposterous.

It might take a generation or more, but ideas can change: the notion of mixed marriages seemed obscene to the average Mormon just a generation ago, yet here we are today with a growing acceptance of the practice. There is obviously still ground to cover, but the tide has definitely turned. The same process is happening in real time with same-sex marriage. Interfaith marriage is only lagging behind due to outdated clauses in the membership contracts.

Today a child might rightfully say “Mom prefers Sam’s Club and Dad likes Costco; I like them both!” Tomorrow that child might say the same thing about a Catholic mom and a Mormon dad. That scenario is only problematic today because of absurdly arrogant and dogmatically medieval notions about heavenly entry requirements – the same misplaced ideals that inspired the original crusades as well as latter-day crusades like the Indian Placement Program and similar travesties.

What if a child born into a mixed-faith union decides they want both membership cards? Or what if they come to dislike box warehouses altogether and prefer shopping at the local produce market? Should they be barred from ever visiting the membership warehouse again? When it comes to the retail sector, it sounds obvious enough that we should all feel free to shop wherever we’d like. Why should it be any different with religion or culture?

When the movie “Loving” was released, it was accompanied by the #ThankYouLovings Twitter and Facebook campaigns in which interracial couples posted their photos. Going back to the “Interwoven” image in the previous chapter, it was made of randomly placed images repeated from those posts, but I’d like to see it done for real with any of Tony’s charts – whether it’s broken down by race, religion, or nationality – to help promote the validation and acceptance of loving relationships regardless of preconceived restrictions. Yes, the ability to speak the same language without bringing Google Translate in as an extramarital partner is a reasonable criterion in selecting a partner, but as for the color of your passport, we have visas for that! It seems ironic that the group that has historically protested so many types of mixed marriages was at the same time promoting mixed orientation unions, which is the one type of mixed marriage that is arguably the most dangerous to promote! Then again, maybe that shouldn’t come as any surprise since we’re dealing with the same, incarnate irony and hypocrisy with which the group that spent decades pushing for legal acceptance of alternative, non-traditional unions ended up being the prime force behind the lockdown on the legal definition of traditional marriage.

In my opinion, true disavowment of previous policies requires some sort of positive effort to help set things right. To me, this sort of mosaic image showing real, loving couples – people who have often been labeled unacceptable by their own family, friends, or judgmental outsiders – could help positively demonstrate the beautiful, “interwoven” tapestry that is created when they join

together – in absolute contrast to LDS statements on the topic issued not just in the pre-emancipation age but during my own lifetime as well. Could a loving God really loathe most of the unions in that mix, accepting only those that fall along that thin, diagonal line? I wholeheartedly disavow that notion!

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Alternative Essay

My suggestion for an alternative *Race and the Priesthood* essay wouldn't need to be any longer than this:

“The priesthood ban was wrong. We are sorry.”

Those two sentences actually say more than the two thousand slick words of the official essay that somehow manage to dodge any accountability or express any regret, while justifying unjustifiable elements of exclusion with excuses draped in historical context.

I guess I could leave it at that, but since the 2013 essay was largely silent on mixed relationships, I might suggest appending a few additional statements in order to help reach another rung on the repentance ladder by acknowledging some complicity in the misguided directions of the past. I'll limit this one to promoting the acceptance of interracial and international unions, but the same ought to be said for same-sex and interfaith marriages...though that would require a much larger leap based on the current dogma. That said, here's a suggested addendum to the essay as the first baby steps toward real equality:

“Those who preceded us in our apostolic roles had a special responsibility to preach truth, and we now recognize that some of our predecessors failed to implement Christ's teachings in policies and practices that continue to have a stigma within the LDS Church because of the misconceptions that were promoted. For that we are deeply sorry. For those who fell in love and had to deny that love or were forced to live in fear or isolation because of misguided policies against mixed marriage, we are truly sorry. While no penance can undo historical wrongs, we endeavour to promote equality in all of our current and future dealings, and we encourage the same for all of our members. Policies against interfaith, international, and interracial relationships were simply based on flawed assumptions that we now know to be unsound.

“We may or may not be right in our beliefs, and we acknowledge that others may or may not be right in their own beliefs. It's ok to have differing beliefs as long as you can sincerely accept the potential validity of your partner's beliefs. Please don't go into a marriage with a presumed knowledge of your own correctness; that will doom your relationship in more ways than one. For those embarking along a path toward marriage, please ignore the color of your fiance's skin or their nation of origin. If you decide to raise children together, please try to teach them to accept others for who they are without judgment, thereby helping to make statements like this unnecessary for future generations. The most important consideration for anyone seeking a partner is to find a good person whom you truly love and who loves you back.

The 19th-century tombstones of a Catholic wife and Protestant husband who were not allowed to be buried in the same cemetery may seem absurd to us today. We may ask ourselves how anyone could really have subscribed to that sort of dogmatism. But the fake border between the cemeteries is no less fictitious than the allegedly eternal chasm that threatens those Mormons considering a mixed-faith relationship today, leaving those who embark down such a “tragic” path to believe that they will be eternally locked into those little houses. Come on already!



Fake walls with real consequences

Here are some closing lyrics to sum it all up:

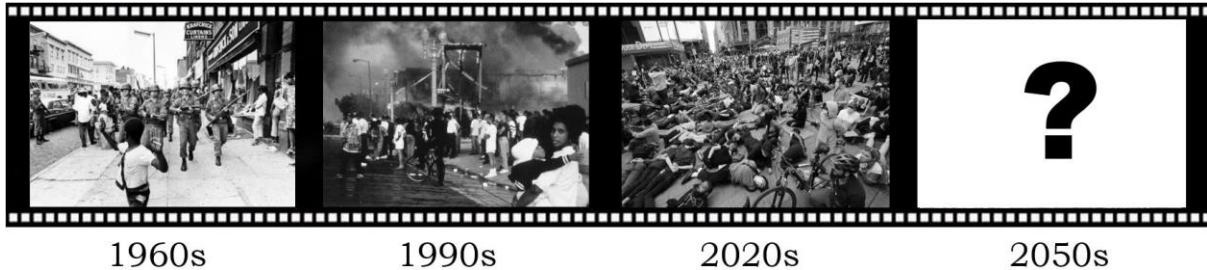
*“You can’t make yourself stop dreaming who your dreaming of,
So love who you love, who you love.”*



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## 2020 Epilogue: Floydian slip

*In the wake of George Floyd's brutal murder, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints had a singular opportunity to atone for its racist past. That chance is slipping away as other topics now dominate the headlines. Will we need to wait another generation to see real change?*



I watched the 1992 Los Angeles riots unfold from a safe distance as a missionary in Germany. Being half a world away – and lacking a TV – I didn't grasp the severity of the unrest, but my companion's father was serving as an active-duty California cop at the time, and based on the snippets of apocalyptic news that we could gather from shop window television screens, we definitely feared for his life. Luckily, the riots ended up subsiding within a week – which wasn't even enough time for my companion to get a letter from home about how his family had been affected.

I didn't really feel like there was anything I could offer to the discussion from where I sat, and life seemed to get back to normal soon enough. In the years following my return to the US, I saw a few systemic changes that occurred as a result of the protests, but eventually – perhaps aided by OJ's acquittal – suburbanites seem to have convinced themselves that the pendulum had swung far enough in the opposite direction for their comfort. Progress toward improved race relations seemed to stagnate – or at least drop out of the Provo newscasts that I could access at the time.

Now that similar tensions have erupted – and largely subsided again – a full generation later, I find myself wondering whether I could have done more to help combat racism in the meantime. Again, I found myself overseas this time around, watching the 2020 protests unfold from a safe distance an ocean away. And again, I didn't feel there was much I could do about it other than to watch it all go down on the news. Perhaps that echoes the insulated sentiment of my parents when they watched news footage of the 1960s race riots from their student apartments in Utah Valley, which may as well have been a foreign country at the time!

Given the regular recurrence interval between these three periods of unrest, it sure seems like a pattern that repeats itself with each passing generation. Are we doomed to replicate this scenario another generation from now when a previously obscure name like Rodney King or George Floyd suddenly becomes a catalyst for lighting the fire of pent-up infuriation that has accumulated in the meantime?

I keep reading news reports and social media posts claiming that this time around, things are going to be different – that the sheer magnitude of the ambient energy will spark a real change, breaking the cycle. I really hope that is the case, but the real test, of course, comes after the headlines have dropped to the bottom of the newsfeeds. So how can we collectively make those predictions come true, harnessing the energy of the protests, capturing their momentum, and instigating a real, continuing change rather than stifling, suppressing, and bottling up the dissent so that it ignites and explodes again in another generation? How can a single individual help to dismantle *institutional* racism within the *institutions* that they belong to?



When the head of the Mormon *institution* called on all racists to repent in June 2020, I thought that might signal the start of something profound, perhaps inspiring the first step up the *stairway to heavenly* penance. I was initially hopeful that a real change was coming; but sadly, within the official statements, there wasn't even a first-rung acknowledgment of the Church's own racist past nor any apology to those harmed along the way. Still, I followed news stories that seemed to offer hope, including accounts of harmonious meetings between the LDS Church and the NAACP.



The encouraging photos above were accompanied by headlines about the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints “locking arms” with the NAACP. Those positive headlines appeared primarily in news outlets controlled by the LDS Church itself.

In reality, the official response to the meetings from an authorized spokesman for the NAACP was that there seems to be “no willingness on the part of the church to do anything material.”

He acknowledged an improving friendliness but stated that the emerging partnership has not borne the fruits that some NAACP leaders had hoped. He added further that the group hasn't seen very much progress on joint projects.

The handful of collaborations have been “minor efforts,” he said. They “do not befit the stature and magnitude of what the LDS Church can do and should do.” In that light, the NAACP is “looking forward to the church doing more to undo the 150 years of damage they did by how they treated African Americans in the church, by their endorsement of how African Americans were treated throughout the country, including segregation and Jim Crow laws.”

Yes, there were talks and hugs and a photo op with linked arms that made the backdrop for a very believable headline. But the NAACP special counsel said that given the lack of tangible efforts, he can only look forward “to their deeds matching their words,” adding, “It's time now for more than sweet talk.”

On a daily basis during the peak of the unrest, Mormon social media streams distributed official statements condemning racism, but with no acknowledgment of the pain that the Church's own discriminatory policies have introduced – not just in the past, but every day that goes by without a real retraction of the historical, racial ban. It seems even the “sweet talk” is a stretch, and if that isn't even there, how can we move on to the deeds?

There is an obvious discrepancy between the NAACP's position and the celebratory articles published by Church sources. One of the things that I find bothersome about the diverging story

lines is the number of retweets and reposts of the whitewashed, one-sided articles that were sent around without any accompanying calls for further efforts or any recognition of the lack of substance. I never saw a single LDS source cite the NAACP's version of the meeting minutes.

It's almost like we're trying to highlight things that make us feel good about ourselves, hoping to convince our hearts that we are part of an organization that is a force for good. We all want that. We all deserve that. But in this case, in terms of genuine efforts to combat racism, it just isn't true.

In the height of the June 2020 protests, I ran across an article in my newsfeed that got my attention – and not in a good way! The headline in the June 10 Salt Lake Tribune claimed that [Brigham Young's descendants say, "he was no racist."](https://www.sltrib.com/religion/2018/06/10/brigham-young-may-have-started-the-priesthood-ban-on-blacks-but-he-was-no-racist-say-his-descendants-his-mission-was-to-save-the-church/)

<https://www.sltrib.com/religion/2018/06/10/brigham-young-may-have-started-the-priesthood-ban-on-blacks-but-he-was-no-racist-say-his-descendants-his-mission-was-to-save-the-church/>

The article featured a group of Brigham Young's descendants who tried to downplay his racist rhetoric and blame the racist policies he implemented on God's will. A 2016 survey of over 1,000 self-identified Latter-day Saints found that almost two-thirds of members believe racial ban to be "God's will," so perhaps that shouldn't come as a surprise; but for me, seeing the words "it was God's will" standing unchallenged in print, highlighted the sad realization that a divinely inspired racial ban is still the belief of many LDS Church members and is, in fact, still the official stance of the LDS Church despite every carefully worded statement decrying the "explanations" for the ban without disavowing its implementation in the first place. I'm sorry, but that is *systemic racism* by definition, which is exactly what many of the 2020 rallies (and even the First Presidency statements on the subject!) were aimed at combating.

Now this article hit me hard by association; in a way, I could consider myself a descendant of Brigham Young, though he's not a known blood relative of mine. Now maybe I don't count because of the missing DNA links, but whether or not I get a place at the table, I was "celestially" sealed to this dispensation's Prophet #2 through my adopted triple-great grandfather.

Nobody asked for my input on the question of his racism, but if I have any say in it, I would say that only his *racist* descendants could possibly claim he was no *racist*. Pushing the blame on God as a convenient scapegoat seems like a low blow, but I guess as long as that ambiguity is allowed from the top, we can all be exonerated for our compliance with systemic racism!

I can't believe this is actually going on today. This reported denial of Brigham Young's racism was stated in 2020...right in the middle of the George Floyd uprisings and the snowballing demands for equality. That's when this group of descendants decided it was time to stand up for Brigham Young and claim that the racial ban he implemented and upheld was God's will? Seriously?

Well, can you blame them? These particular descendants are loyal Mormons, having vowed their eternal servitude to a system that will not claim otherwise. The *absence* of just five words, "The ban was not inspired," tells a very sad tale indeed about the *presence* of systemic racism. How can we start talking about the *deeds* the NAACP is asking for when the most crucial, missing *words* haven't even been said yet? I'm all for letting the past be the past, as long as the present stance is truthful. But a fake news story about God's complicity in the ban is still being propagated today. Until that misdeed is officially undone, how can we possibly let the past be the past?

Well what would actually happen if an announcement were made and those missing words were finally to be uttered? Some people – like those quoted in the Tribune article – would need to

eat their words. But I'm guessing most younger Mormons (at least those who can't remember life under the ban) would wonder why the duplicate statement was necessary at all; because they believe the sentiment of that announcement is already contained in apparent apologies (which, incidentally, don't include any form of the word *apology*). Those most affected by the statement's absence, however, realize full well that it has been deliberately and cunningly omitted from all official statements covering racism. And I believe that the change would be welcome to those looking for healing.

Here's an emotional [excerpt from Sistas in Zion's Zandra Vranes](#) that really captures some of the sentiment around the refusal to admit that the ban was wrong:

"The only thing keeping us here is knowing that the things that are damaging and traumatizing us, God didn't do it. And if you force people to believe, and if you double down on the idea that these things were of God, you will break us! If you make me believe that God did this to me, I cannot be here anymore. Because why would I stay with a God who thinks this of me? You have to tell people that the things that hurt them and harm them — that God did not do it to them! If you damage people's relationship with God, you break them, and you cannot put them back together again. The minute someone believes that God is the reason that they are not whole, they are finished. And we, as the body of Christ, have the ability to make sure that no person ever believes that. I cannot stress that enough."

<https://mormondom.com/abbreviated-transcript-of-the-zandra-vranes-sistas-in-zion-live-facebook-stream-1c1b2762d52f>

Another BYU graduate, Melodie Jackson, was quoted in an [ABC article](#) about the response to the 2020 protests with these words:

"It was in the manual this past year that the priesthood ban was of God and it wasn't, it wasn't, and the Church needs to reckon with that."

<https://www.abc4.com/news/local-news/black-members-call-for-anti-racism-training-in-the-church-of-jesus-christ-of-latter-day-saints/>

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Tick-tock

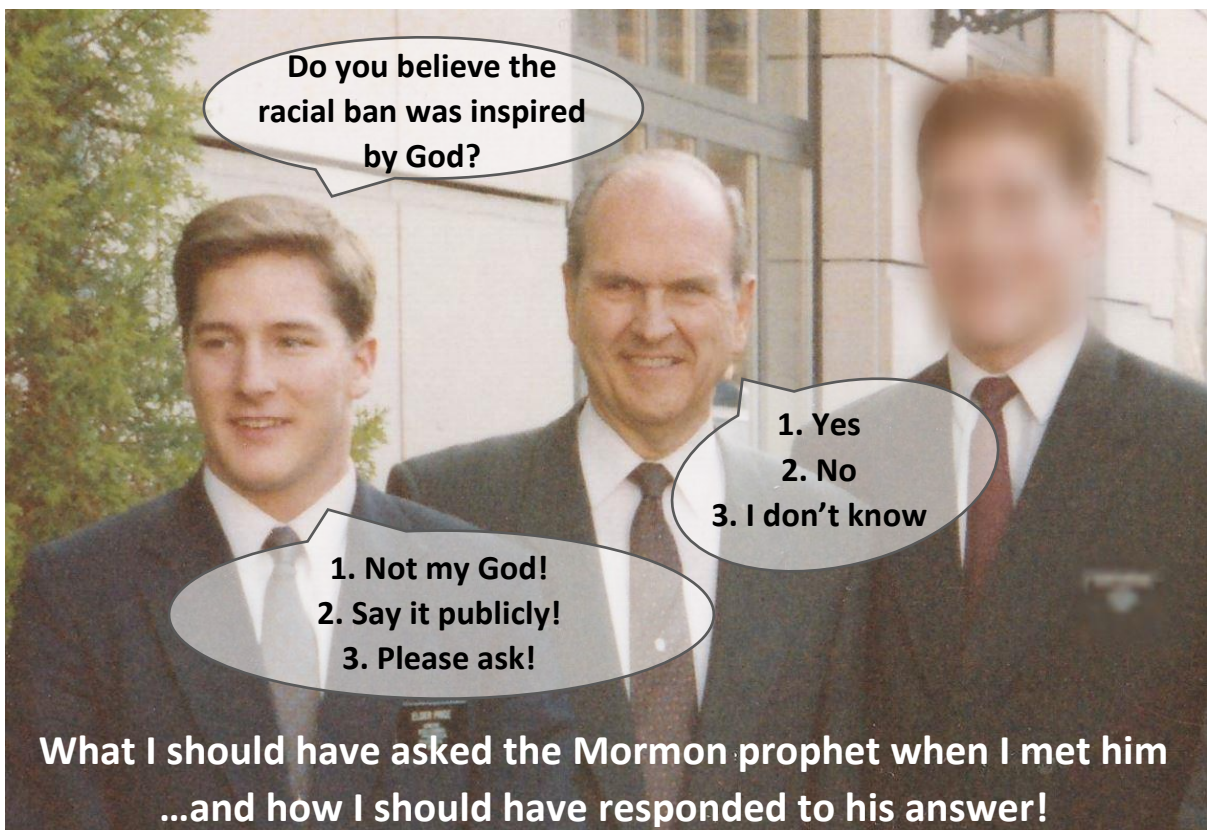
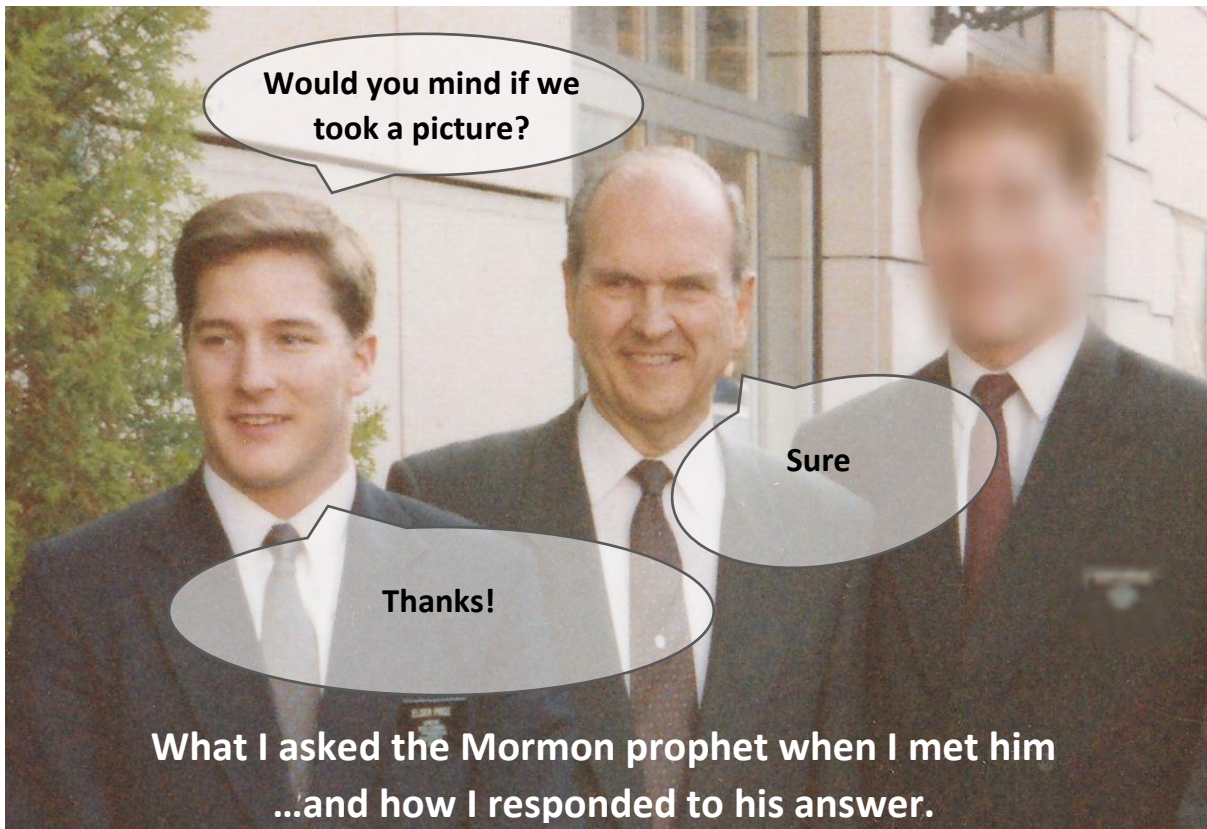
Isn't it about time for an answer about the ban's divinity once and for all? Only one man can answer that question with finality for the Church. I happened to meet that man when I was a young missionary in Dresden. I could have asked him anything that day, but here's what I asked when I shook his hand: "Would you mind if we took a picture?"

I managed to get a photo op out of it, but looking back, there are a lot of other questions I wish I had asked him instead. How about this: "Do you believe the racial ban was inspired by God?"

There are really only three responses to that question other than silence, a refusal to answer, or a convenient change of topic. If he chose to answer the question, I can envisage three options for my own follow-up statement, had I been in my right mind at the time:

- | | |
|-------------------------------|---|
| 1. His response: Yes | My follow-up: "Sorry, not my God, I'm out of here!" |
| 2. His response: No | My follow-up: "Then just say it publicly already!" |
| 3. His response: I don't know | My follow-up: "You said God inspired the logo change. This seems more important. Please ask." |

Or maybe I should put this in the form of a meme:



I cannot accept Answer #1, nor do I believe for a second that the brethren in the upper echelons have not formed an opinion that sways their beliefs to one side of the fence or the other; so #3 is out as well. In my eyes, the only realistic, believable answer is #2. And if that's the truth – that Mormon leaders believe the ban was as off-base as the racist explanations that they vocally dismiss – why won't they just say it?

Brigham Young, who first enforced the ban, publicly proclaimed the reasons for its divinity “in the name of Jesus Christ.”



Retgression: Brigham Young's statue being moved back into the Utah State Capitol Building

Those authorized, published, spoken-as-a-prophet-and-not-as-a-man doctrines are now disavowed by the modern Church, but bizarrely, to this day there is still a refusal to admit that the ban itself was just as wrong as its denounced justifications. As far as today's top LDS leaders, either they believe it was God's will – and by inference worship a God who is foreign to me – or they believe it was not God's will but recognize that such an *admission* ticket to the 21st century comes with a purchase price that they are simply not willing to pay.

If I had to venture an opinion on the matter – which I think every practicing Mormon is obliged to do – I imagine the deliberate omission of those crucial words arises from a fear of the potential repercussions, measured in terms of the level of commitment to current guidance among Church membership; that concession, after all, would imply that each of the prophets who upheld the ban was simply wrong in their adherence to it – and that any in-tune prayer uttered on any one of the 40,000-odd days that the policy was on the books should have led to Official Declaration #2 that very same day.

There is some debate about whether Brigham Young inherited the idea for the ban from his predecessor, but from the time he openly implemented it until the time it was rescinded under Spencer W. Kimball, nine other prophets of the past had to decide whether to uphold the ban or to renounce it. The presence or absence of the five missing words, “The ban was not inspired,” paints two contrasting pictures of any one of those nine prophets who find themselves squashed between the bookends of Kimball and Young:

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1. The **absence** of those five words implies the following screenplay that could star any one of those nine interim prophets:

*Opening scene, set in a nicely furnished bedroom in the Avenues of pre-1978 Salt Lake City:*

Cut to an elderly figure, kneeling at his bed. Deeply concerned about the pain that the priesthood ban is causing among the Latter-day Saints, the kneeling prophet begs God in fervent prayer to reveal His will:

“Please Lord, isn’t it time yet?” the prophet cries, “Thy people are suffering. Haven’t we been tested enough?”

“No, not yet,” comes the answer, perceived through spiritual ears, “but when my people are sufficiently humbled and prepared, equality will come for all men, and you will have cause to rejoice on that blessed day.”

As God’s mouthpiece on earth, the prophet feels duty-bound to proclaim the truth about the ban, so he presses a bit further:

“So how should we explain the inequality in the meantime?” the prophet asks.

“I mean, I really, really wish everyone would stop with their silly explanations,” the Lord responds, “but let’s just let the lies continue, and we’ll clear it up in the future. Remember, I let the wheat and the tares grow together...for a time.”

The prophet holds his hands in the air. He looks heavenward, keeping his physical eyes closed but his spiritual eyes open. Basking in the light of discernment and caught up in the spirit of revelation, he is blessed with a God-granted knowledge of the real reasons for the ban, but he is then told that those reasons are so sacred that they cannot be explained to mere mortals...no matter how pious they may be.

God’s mysterious ways are not yet to be revealed, but through patience, persistence, and humility, the prophet comes to accept the divine timeline, trusting that we’ll get there someday.

In the meantime, Mormons get a free pass for their divinely sanctioned bigotry.

*Scene II: Salt Lake Tabernacle, June 1978:*

“And there was much rejoicing...yaaaaay!”

*Scene III: Provo Temple grounds, June 2020:*

Pan to faithful LDS students joining the protest marchers while brandishing iPhones. The students take selfies and cheerfully retweet the Deseret News NAACP article about how awesome the Church is at not being racist these days. They encourage each other to hold to the rod and keep the faith, hoping their participation in the protest will distract non-Mormons – aka potential investigators – from their own belief that God still doesn’t think their parents’ church should have had black leaders. If it wasn’t God’s will in the first place, the prophet would have said so, after all!

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2. The **presence** of those five missing words would paint a contrasting picture:

*Opening scene, set in a nicely furnished bedroom in the Avenues of pre-1978 Salt Lake City:*

Cut to an elderly figure, kneeling at his bed. Faced with accusations of racism within the Church, he desires to know God’s will on the subject. Being no more in tune with divinity than any other soul who wanders this planet, though, he is left to decide for himself. Knowing nothing of the future flip flop that would lead to a disavowment of the reasons for the ban, he decides to uphold not just the ban itself, but all the false reasons for it, too. He bases his decision on the warm fuzzies that he feels when he thinks about keeping things as they are, which contrast with the fear that he feels when he thinks about the uproar that such a concession would lead to among the largely segregationist population of the Church.

In an internally concocted vision, which bears no linkage to any natural or supernatural source outside of his own head, he shudders at the potential abomination of a rising generation of mixed-race Mormons. He mistakes the fear that his own indoctrination has fed him for a stupor of thought, taking that sign as a no-action answer to his prayer, which bolsters his support for the status quo of injustice.

He resolves to do nothing and climbs into bed.

*Scene II: Salt Lake Tabernacle, June 1978:*

“And there was much rejoicing...yaaaaay!”

*Scene III: BYU campus, June 2020:*

Freed from their own bondage to a 200-year old lie by the unprecedented apology and renouncement of the ban’s divinity, the students can stand with those demanding justice and racial equality without hypocrisy.

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Protesters and counter-protesting “peacekeepers” near the Provo Temple, 2020

If people can be coerced into believing that the ban was God's will, the first image of the prophet patiently awaiting the 1978 "revelation" can stand. By refraining from condemning the ban itself, believing Church members – at least those of a pre-1978 vintage – can keep that pretty picture in their heads, justifying their complicit involvement in systemic racism by deflecting the blame to a higher power.

The current leadership would love to paint that first picture for Church members to digest, but it is utterly false and entirely indigestible. The "good, warm feeling" upon which President Kimball based his "revelation" contrasts with the absence of that feeling as experienced by those who prayed about its validity while the ban was in place. Dallin Oaks, for example, claims to have experienced this phenomenon, professing his inability to confirm the ban's truth while it was in place. His prayers can "bounce off the ceiling" like the rest of ours, to borrow from a book title that made its rounds in my youth. Perhaps this "stupor of thought" should have served as the scriptural answer to prayer that, in turn, casts a shadow on each prophet who upheld the ban!

If today's church leaders were to admit that the ban was never God's will *in the first place*, it would indicate that a continuous succession of prophets wasn't listening *in the first place*...giving current followers the freedom to ignore any other statement issued in the past, present, or future under the guise of inspiration or revelation!

So yes, it's scary. But it's the right thing to do!

A 2020 statement about the ban being wrong would expose the principal character in the second play as being no more adept or inept at perceiving God's will than any one of his followers. If there had been any connection whatsoever to God, He would have immediately called for the ban to be lifted. So either God wasn't talking, or the professed prophet wasn't listening, or both. Luckily for Mormons who were caught on the drifting, radio-silent ship, the civil rights movement intervened, and the accumulating pile of lawsuits finally forced a response, breaking the cycle of ignorant apathy – which likely would have continued through passing generations without the tugboat of civil unrest.

In any case, issuing the long-awaited statement condemning the ban would draw the curtain wide open, revealing that the emperor never had any clothes in the first place. It would turn the prophetic succession into a classic case of the blind leading the blind, completely glitching out the Matrix.

Although it is now blatantly obvious to the entire world that the ban was never God's will in the first place, Character #2 never would have known this, because his proclaimed gift of seership was a mantle of nakedness that would only be fully exposed once the post-mortem, public sentiment caught up with the inaction he promoted while leading the Church.

Sure, there would be widespread implications associated with such an admission, but so what? What would the real, daily impacts be if the ban's real source was finally admitted as simply originating from the heads and tainted hearts of biased men? How would practicing, believing members of the Church react to the change? Perhaps in the aftermath of such a statement, some church members would be a bit more selective about how unequivocally and unquestioningly the current First Presidency's advice is accepted, but I suspect most members wouldn't be phased in the least. Given the reaction to similar backpedaling around doctrine and policy reversals, most Mormons would likely get over it that very same day, supporting the official stance, come what may. They already realize that many former prophets weren't listening *in the first place* about a lot of things that believing Mormons now cut them some slack for. Why would this one be received any differently?

I believe the vast majority of practicing Saints would get over this concession in a heartbeat. If historical shake-ups serve as any sort of precedent, a trickle of fence-sitting, quasi-adherents may make a stink, but the masses are not going to just turn their backs on the whole enterprise based on these sorts of admissions. On the contrary, I think more members would simply find the modernized Church to be a more comfortable place to worship, having been relieved of the burden of rationalizing things that many Latter-Day Saints, particularly the younger generation, don't support anyway.

So just do it already! Say the words!

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I thought this might finally be the year. Unfortunately, though, the continuing refusal among the current gerontocracy to admit that the ban was wrong seems likely to remain an ongoing stain on race relations for anyone associated with today's LDS Church.

So in the meantime, if systemic racism won't be getting denounced by the system itself, what can individuals do to climb that repentance ladder? I'd like to take some steps of my own and perhaps offer them up as challenges to others, but who am I to comment on the matter at all? I'm just a plain old hetero-white-guy-American-ex-pat-BYU-alum watching recent events unfold from overseas. So what can I possibly offer to this conversation?

I guess the first step is admission. I admit that I myself have been shamefully silent on this issue for many years, believing that my skin color disqualified me from speaking on the matter, and I am truly sorry that I did not speak up earlier.

I find it awfully annoying when white people tell other white people to stop being so racist, like they're on some high horse of their own. Unspoken advice tends to run through my head when I read posts on the subject of race from those who, like me, are far removed from daily decisions that have anything to do with race: "Show it through example and actions rather than self-righteous words." I am not putting myself up on any pedestal to try to serve as an example; rather, I am acknowledging that my passive approach to combating racism was woefully inadequate.

My own social settings from elementary school through to high school and college took place in environments that were 99% white. Since then I have been fortunate enough to travel the world, but can I excuse my own, past ignorance based on historical context? My early interactions with anyone of color were very limited. There were a few notable exceptions; for example, I competed on a high school team with a few black wrestlers (one of whom stepped into the ring with Mike Tyson!) and at one point had a black bishop. Although I genuinely liked and admired them and thoroughly enjoyed our relatively brief interactions, I'm sure I've said some insensitive, ignorant things and – perhaps more importantly – made some assumptions based on the color of their skin. I hope I have evolved since that time, and I am truly sorry, having no valid excuses to offer for my behavior and for my ignorant mindset.

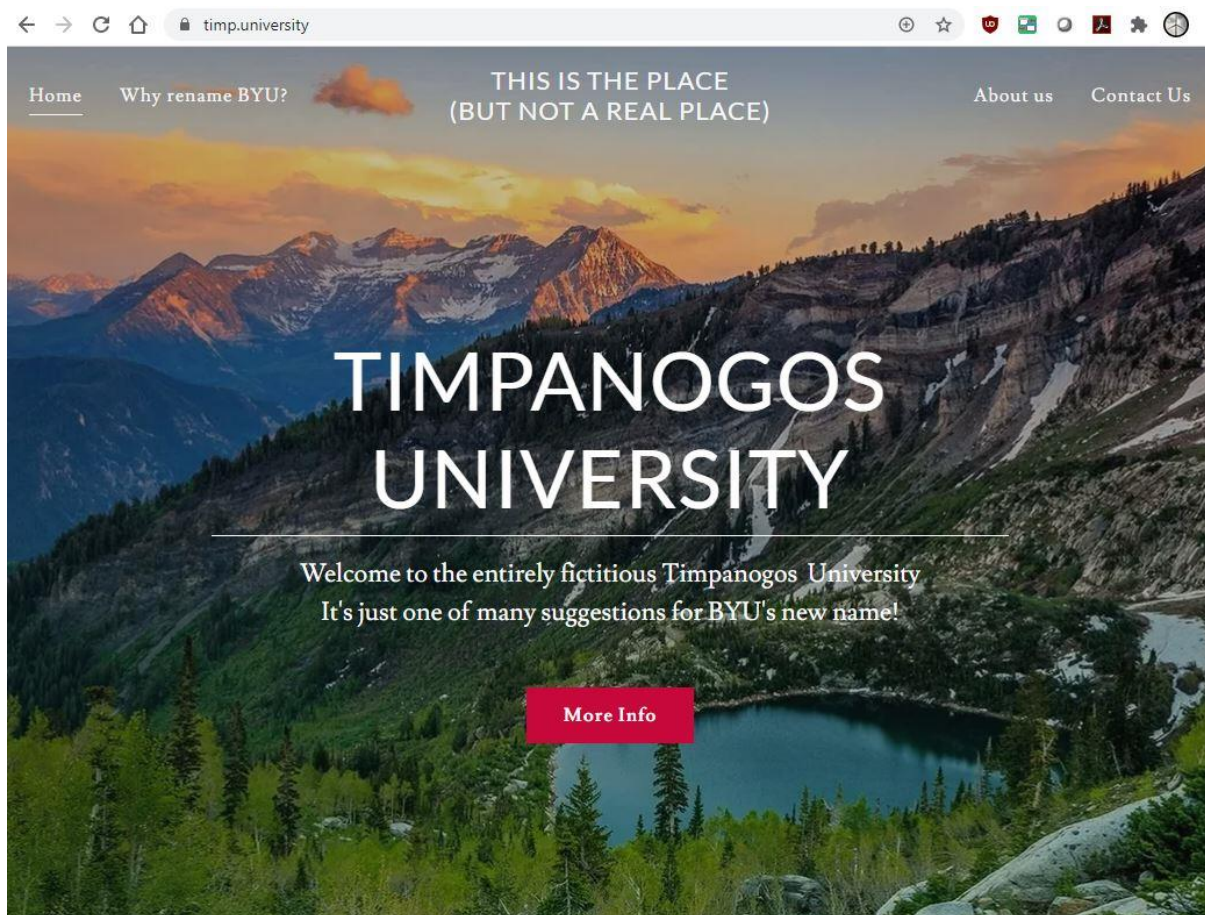
In the past, my inclination has been to let those who have been affected by racism be heard, feeling that my job was to *just listen*. As has been pointed out by a flurry of recent memes and protest placards around the world, however, silence is acceptance, and all too often the *listen* turns to *dismissin'* once the fervor subsides.

A more active response is obviously well overdue from every soul on this planet, whether or not we have been directly affected by racism. So what can white people do to break their silence and come to the aid of those who can't breathe? I've seen that question posted all over the internet

over the last few months. Well, I do believe there is one white man in Utah who could utter five simple words that would make a difference – maybe not to the rest of the world or to the rest of the country – but certainly to the millions who count his voice as valid as God’s own. But this isn’t about him or about anyone else. I can’t extract those words from his mouth; but I certainly can speak up myself, taking actions of my own that may not have much of an impact on others, but feel like a good starting point nonetheless.

One very simple thing I can do right now is to disavow my association with Brigham Young’s name, because *Black Lives Matter*.

My engineering diploma includes Brigham Young’s name, but several years ago I deleted BYU from my resumes and social media profiles and replaced it with a fictitious institution named after my favorite mountain that towers over the BYU campus:



Sure, the hypothetical school is made up, but so is the notion that Brigham Young’s racial ban was inspired! Maybe that fake substitution carries some ethical implications with it; plenty of people have been fired or worse for falsifying their degrees, after all – but I was hoping it would spark some conversations that would allow me to state my conviction about racial equality. Since I swapped it out, though, nobody has ever even asked me the first thing about it, so my little protest has stayed silent.

While other monuments were being dismantled by angry crowds during the 2020 unrest, LDS monuments seem to have survived the threat. Somebody spray painted the word “racist” on a Brigham Young statue located on the BYU campus (which happens to be situated against a backdrop of buildings named after slave owners and segregationists.) The vandalism would have gone entirely

unnoticed if the photographer had passed by an hour later, since the graffiti was promptly removed by the grounds crew, but the photo was snapped just in time to accompany a newspaper article about the act. The article, in turn, was accompanied by a few online comments debating the merits of renaming the campus.

For years there has been an active [petition to rename BYU](https://www.change.org/p/lds-church-change-the-name-of-brigham-young-university) in light of Brigham Young's racist views and policies:

(<https://www.change.org/p/lds-church-change-the-name-of-brigham-young-university>)

A few hundred people had signed it before 2020. During the racial strife of 2020, thousands more signed it, perhaps aided by articles like "[Time to change the name of BYU](#)," written by BYU grad Tasi Young, which was published in the Salt Lake Tribune:

(<https://www.sltrib.com/opinion/commentary/2020/06/12/tasi-young-time-change/>)

Dropping Brigham Young's name, given that he was the instigator of the ban, might represent a step in the right direction. In my view, however, the campaign to rename BYU and tear down his statue is a side channel to the more pressing matter of tearing down the ongoing, systematic racism that is packaged up in the myth of divine support for racist practices. Perhaps the mounting pressure to rename the campus can help draw attention to the absence of a statement contrary to the notion of divine bigotry?

I thought there might be some potential, but after this relatively brief flash of momentum, the "Rename BYU" movement died down again, and only a handful of supporters have signed the petition in the last few months. So congratulations to us! Let's give ourselves a pat on our own backs! We survived this one without being forced to admit the truth and without a single policy change, name change, or dismantled statue. Brigham Young still graces the U.S. Capitol's Statuary *Hall of Fame* as the most representative soul to embody Utah's spirit. No culture was cancelled, and *fortunately* for the *fortune*, no expenses were expended on an expensive rebranding effort for his namesake school. We can shout out a cheer that the widow's mites have been spared [or perhaps redirected toward a more comprehensive rebranding effort for the entire church...] and now that the terrorists and anarchists have all moved to Portland and Seattle, Utah's Mormons won't have to face our uncomfortable past again until a new generation makes a stink!

Well, in the meantime, even if BYU's board of directors wouldn't consider a new name due to a number of predictable rebuttals – including the massive expense of rebranding – renaming it on your own resume is absolutely free! And how does it feel to take another step up the redemption ladder – with more real action to come? Priceless!

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The LDS Church seems to have dodged another bullet in 2020. Similar to the aftermath of the 1992 riots, Mormons are able to breathe a sigh of relief now that the unrest has subsided. The canned First Presidency statements condemning racism seem to have done the trick of deflecting any substantial calls for introspection, and the Church largely avoided having to confront its uncomfortable, racist past.

The 2020 incidents should have provided an ideal catalyst for some real change within the LDS Church, but the fervor around racial equality is now dying down again, at least in Salt Lake City. If history is indeed repetitious, we may need to wait another thirty years for our next chance to instigate real change...unless...unless...

How's this? Throughout the 2020 episode, thousands of COVID-restricted LDS missionaries, many with nothing in their daily planner besides studying and sending out e-mails, watched the riots play out from the safe distance of their own apartments. Many of those missionaries are still under lockdown orders today. Could those missionaries be doing something more to contribute to the cause of equality and to the fight against injustice? If history does indeed repeat itself once more, we'll reach another boiling point in the year 2050 – long after today's missionaries return home to start raising their own families. In that event, perhaps they'll look back as I am doing now and wonder if there is anything they could have done in the meantime to make a difference.

Well, what about those thousands of missionaries with nothing to do except write letters these days? Hmm...don't they deserve to know the official stance on the racial ban, considering these troubled times? When they do start preaching from door to door again, questions about racism will certainly be more prevalent. I would think these missionaries have a right to know whether their commander-in-chief believes that the ban was inspired.

These missionaries have to write their mission president a letter every single week; they are part of a direct chain of command that could pass their questions straight to the very top. I am an outsider with no means of instigating an internal change, but what if the missionaries collectively started sending the request for an answer up the chain from the inside?

It's a simple question: "Was the priesthood ban inspired?" There are only three answers, and each one comes with a unique call to action. So what's it going to be?

I should have asked that question as a missionary myself many decades ago; the corresponding call to action – and my own personal willingness to actively combat racism – could have begun much earlier. Today's missionaries could break that cycle and become part of the movement to help eradicate the false notion of a white supremacist God who arbitrarily enforces his bias while allowing the implementation of his will to be rationalized with outright, pernicious lies. Let's not wait until 2050 for the next opportunity to correct the record!

To church members: Ask the question already! To church leaders: Answer the question already!



Chapter 4. Whistleblower

My Analogy: High Treason

“Who’s on the Lord’s side, who?”

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*New recruits at Camp Broadmeadows*

Robert Crowe had always been a patriot of the British Empire, despite having been raised about as far from London as you could possibly get. He was proud of his British heritage and what his forefathers had accomplished in the fields of science, technology, literature, and other passions that he shared. When King George V addressed the dominions of the British Empire in 1914, pleading for help to protect the Commonwealth and defeat the Kaiser, Robert enlisted in the army without a second thought.

He began his military training at Camp Broadmeadows, located just outside his hometown of Melbourne, Australia. The size of his regiment grew every day as new volunteers in civilian clothes marched from central Melbourne to the camp.

Given the overwhelming response, it soon became clear that conscription would be entirely unnecessary in Australia. Those who hadn't joined up straight away ultimately realized that staying home would not be a viable choice due to the public embarrassment associated with their perceived cowardice. In fact, posters and newspaper advertisements all around the young country encouraged women to shame their male relatives into joining the army, resulting in a prevailing attitude that became even more effective than a draft.



Robert began his military service as a simple foot soldier – holding the rank of a private – and he was sent to the front lines just as the Dardanelles campaign was getting underway in Turkey. Upon arrival on the Gallipoli Peninsula, he was directed to the newly cleared parade grounds, where he stood in line with other new recruits in their clean uniforms, waiting to be briefed on the next steps in their mission to topple Constantinople.

The boys cheered at the speech given by Sergeant Major Ray Carter, a decorated veteran of the Battle of Marne, who reminded each of them how proud they were making their mothers and fathers by fighting against oppression and saving the crown. While they prepared for the assault, they sang army songs and got to know each other even better than they knew their own families. Crowe eventually found that he would trust every brother in the band with his own life – and that he had the mutual trust of his fellow soldiers as well.

Despite their training and bravado, however, life in the trenches soon started sapping the soldiers' morale. When the whistle finally blew – committing them to climb the ladder for the first time and head “over the top” of the trench – some of the soldiers hesitated. Private Crowe, on the other hand, went straight up the ladder and charged ahead without any reluctance whatsoever. When he realized that other soldiers were starting to follow his lead, he confidently motioned the whole gang toward the next trench and dropped in.

“That wasn’t so bad,” Crowe thought as they all took their places in their new position.

At Carter’s direction, they spent the next few days digging a new supply trench to connect back to the command center and made other preparations for the next advance. In the meantime, for his diligent, unquestioning adherence to the commander in charge, Crowe was promoted to the rank of Corporal.

“Here’s a whistle of your own,” Sergeant Carter said, briefing Crowe on his new role as a leader.

Crowe seemed a bit nervous about the road ahead.

“Don’t worry,” Carter said, “we have this one in the bag.”

“How can you be so sure?” asked Crowe.

“Just have a look at this map,” replied Carter, “which came to us with a direct order from the General himself!”

“We have the advantage of high ground,” Crowe read aloud from the typed order, “and as you can see on the map, it’s all downhill from here!”

In the meantime, a set of fresh new recruits marched in through the newly dug trench, and Carter assigned a handful of them to Crowe’s company. There wasn’t a single draftee among them; in fact, the entire Australian contingent in this war was made up of volunteers, a fact that was reflected in their sanguine demeanor.

In his first act as a new corporal, Crowe sat his men down, showed them the map of the battlefield, and told them what was required of them – and how he had managed to advance to this spot himself. The instructions were very simple:

“When you hear the whistle,” he said, “just charge straight ahead as fast as you can run until you get to the next trench.”

As they all lined up to take their positions for the next advance, Corporal Crowe started hearing machine gun fire.

“Do you hear that?” he shouted to Carter.

“I don’t hear a thing,” Sergeant Carter yelled back, “get ready for my signal!”

Something didn’t feel right to Crowe. The machine gun fire seemed to be coming from overhead.

“Ready!” shouted Carter.

“Wait one second,” Crowe responded, feeling the weight of responsibility for his new recruits.

“What?” yelled Carter, “You’ll put the mission at risk if you stall!”

“Quick, hand me that periscope,” Crowe said to one of his recruits, ignoring Carter.

“Put that down!” Sergeant Carter yelled, “you know the General’s orders: nobody gets to use the periscope – it will give away our position to the enemy!”

With bullets whizzing closely over his head, Crowe knew full well that their position was already well known to their Turkish counterparts. If they indeed held the high ground, how could the bullets be hitting the back of his own trench? It didn’t make any sense, and he felt compelled to check it out for himself.

Crowe moved himself out of Sergeant Carter’s sight and put the periscope up for a quick look around at the battlefield. What he saw shocked him. Quite opposite from the contours drawn on the map, the ground actually sloped uphill from the trench, and at the top of the hill he could see prominent machine gun positions manned by Ottoman gunners. He ran back to his position, unsure of his duty in light of this new intelligence.

“Charge!” shouted Carter, flashing a signal to every corporal in the trenches as an order to start blowing their whistles.

“Inspire them, motivate them, force them if you must,” Carter had told them earlier during their training, “but whatever you do, just get them over the top!”

Crowe knew his job: stand by the ladder and blow the whistle like the other corporals were doing.



As he heard the sound of their whistles and looked his own soldiers in the eyes, though, he made a fateful decision: He dropped his own whistle and ran right past Carter toward the supply trench.

“Are you retreating?” Carter demanded

“Look, I’ve seen the battlefield,” Crowe said, “the maps are wrong!”

“I told you not to look out there!” Carter screamed.

“Well now we both know it’s a mess!” Crowe shouted back.

“You don’t get to call the shots,” Carter said, “I outrank you!”

But Crowe was already out of earshot; he kept running at full speed through the trenches as a steady stream of enlisted men filed past him in the opposite direction. Finally he stormed into the command center.

“Your maps are wrong,” he shouted to the Colonel, quite out of breath.

“No they’re not!” responded the startled officer, “and who are you to question the maps?”

“Look at this,” Crowe said, pointing to the maps on the wall, “these show a downhill slope from our trenches.”

“That’s right,” said the Colonel, “these maps were hand-drawn by the General himself who just flew over the battlefield yesterday – I can guarantee you they are 100% right!”

“But have you seen what’s actually out there?” Crowe asked.

“No,” responded the Colonel, “but I don’t have to – I trust the General.”

“Well, I’ve seen it,” Crowe countered, “and it’s uphill all the way!”

“You’re out of line, Corporal,” shouted the Colonel, “and on your way to committing high treason against her majesty the Queen!”



“Call the General and ask him yourself,” said Crowe.

“Fine,” responded the Colonel, “but I’m only making the call to provide some evidence for your court martial for abandoning your position.”

The Colonel went into the adjacent tent to talk with the radio operator. He emerged a few minutes later with a response.

“Ok, so it turns out the maps aren’t entirely accurate,” he said, “but the General has directed us not to tell the soldiers, since it would put our credibility and their morale at risk.”

“But there are machine gunners all around the hill,” said Crowe, “Shouldn’t our troops know that we’re in an unsustainable position!”

“Look, when he said downhill, that’s actually correct,” said the Colonel, “but it’s meant to be understood figuratively.”

“What?” asked Crowe.

“When I say ‘it’s all downhill from here,’” responded the Colonel, “I obviously don’t mean it’s literally a downward slope!”

“But your maps show a literal downward slope – that’s what we’ve all been following!”

“Oh come on, Corporal, don’t be so naïve,” responded the Colonel, “We just drew the maps that way to improve the spirits among the ranks.”

“Are you serious?” asked Crowe.

“Sometimes you just have to create a bit of your own truth to get the job done.”

“But we’re going to lose this battle!” countered Crowe.

“You’ve lost your vision,” the Colonel said, “and you’ve failed in your duty to inspire your troops.”

“I think I’ve actually increased my field of vision,” said Crowe, “and in my vision, this doesn’t end well for us unless we change our course.”

“You can rest assured,” the Colonel replied, “that our victory is absolutely certain here.”

“It’s going to be a slaughter,” Crowe said, “We’re going to end up wishing we had retreated from this position.”

“Our triumph here is 100% guaranteed!” responded the Colonel, “But you’ve got to do your part now and get your tail back out there...otherwise you’ll be hanged for treason while we’re having our victory party – make your choice!”

Crowe just sat there puzzled.

“Just trust me,” the Colonel said, “Now get back to your trench!”

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This is where the story of Corporal Crowe ends...for now. It could obviously go a few different ways from here. So, if this were a “choose your own ending” book, which ending would you

choose for the Corporal? Here are a few options, each with an entirely different outcome for him and for the troops assigned to him:

Should Crowe:

- Go back to the trench and promote the fabrication?
- Go back to the trench and tell his troops the truth?
- Talk himself into believing that the fabrication is the truth?
- Go back to the trench and pretend to follow orders, but secretly organize a mutiny?
- Leak the fabrication to the press?
- Take the court martial with silent defiance?
- Shout the truth from the gallows?
- Run for his life and assume a new identity?
- Surrender to the enemy and assume his fate as a prisoner of war in a Turkish prison?
- Switch sides and fight to save Constantinople from the invaders?

What do you think Crowe should do at this crucial decision point? What is his duty to God? To his country? To his fellow soldiers in the trenches? If it were you standing on that ladder, and you heard the whistle blow after you had found some critical piece of truth that contradicts the battle plan, what would be your next move?

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As for me, I feel like the narrator of this story might as well be Nathan himself, and that he is pointing his finger in my face saying, "You are that man!" Well, in this particular case, that realization doesn't scare me, because up to this point in the story, Crowe has only put himself in danger. I guess I can live with that. Although I trusted others to point me in the right direction, I have to acknowledge that I enlisted voluntarily, and in the end it was my own decision to make.



As illustrated by a bit of digital alteration in the recruitment poster above, confronting those who possess your life-long trust is perhaps more formidable than facing a sergeant you barely know who barks out orders. I feel like I've reached the point of standing up to the commanding officers in questioning the source of the orders I've been following; owning the sedition in front of my closest companions, however, may be another story.

Misguided as my orders might have been, I took them seriously at the time and can perhaps claim to have been a pawn in someone else's battle until now. But once I choose one of the above endings for myself, once I leave that command bunker, the implications of my next choice become much more consequential. If I, for example, decide to propagate a façade and keep the real truth from my own platoon as they storm past me up the ladder, blowing my own whistle and commanding my own men to shoot any deserters for their cowardice...if I am then told that *I am that man*, now that scares the hell out of me!

What if I decide to stop the charade and promote the truth about the maps? Looking at others who have done the same, surprisingly, exposing the errors doesn't actually seem to do any good. There might be a deserter here or there, but most of the troops tend to remain loyally locked in the stalemated battle, even those who realize the maps are wrong. They have been told that anyone like me who thinks they might have seen a mistake in the maps, even an admitted mistake, is only looking at one little snippet of the field. The general, on the other hand, has flown overhead and has a complete map that is entirely correct. If he gave you a map that is wrong, it is right to follow that map, because he knows what he's doing. Perhaps he needs you to follow that map and sacrifice your own little regiment as a diversion so that the full army battalion can invade from their strategically selected, surprise position. If you blow the whistle on the diversion, you'll be undermining the whole battle plan and should get hanged for treason. So fall in line, soldier!

Is that a possibility here? Sure, "stratagem" might be a thing. I may find out I've been wrong with all of this and go down as a traitor; but I saw my patriotic duty as a search for the truth. I'm not claiming to know the answers to any of these questions; the only thing I know is who I've been so far in this open-ended story. And with my kids lined up and heading for the ladder, I don't have much time to debate which of the endings to choose. Am I a *whistle blower*? Or am I a *whistle-blower*?

## My Reality: Gallipoli

*“Did you really believe them when they told you the cause?*

*Did you really believe this war would end all wars?”*

– Eric Bogle, Green Fields of France

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LDS youth are filled with the imagery of joining God’s army and fighting it out against the forces of darkness from a very young age. Sometimes I wonder if that’s what makes the Lord of the Rings, Star Wars, and other fantasy sagas so popular among Mormons: they’re considered to be hypothetical representations of an absolutely real war that was waged before the formation of the earth and will continue to rage well after we’ve left. While I’m sure there are some Mormons who expect a peaceful transition to whatever the next life holds in store, there is a compelling scriptural basis for a competing belief that when we unplug from this matrix, we’ll find ourselves in the middle of an all-out clash between good and evil.

LDS manuals are full of quotes claiming that if we could open our spiritual eyes, we’d see billions and billions of tortured spirits doing everything in their power to possess our bodies and turn our allegiance to their sinister master. According to these visions, every day when we leave our homes – or even when we take our first step out of bed – we are effectively marching off to the front lines of this very real but unseen war.

Primary-age children in the LDS Church get to focus on popcorn, snowmen, rainbows and little streams, interspersed with fun little war stories from the scriptures that stir up equally positive images. When kids sing, “We are as the army of Helaman,” the battle is as harmless as the apricot trees, and a G-rated victory is assured.

In primary lessons, Joseph Smith’s vision is entirely made of light, and he is ever the noble hero; but teenagers soon learn in seminary that Brother Joseph had to fight the demons of hell just to get to that first conversation. Now that story certainly made me wonder whether blissful ignorance might be preferable to having my eyes opened to the nefarious netherworld he described. As far as I was concerned, if a battle with Satan himself was going to be the first answer to that sort of supplication, I think I’ll take a pass. “If any of you lack wisdom...” you might want to keep your mouth shut!

On my first day of seminary, the teacher opened the class by saying, “Hi, I’m Brother Krieg. That means WAR in German!” He turned out to be as benign as they come, but in our seminary lessons, we learned about war after war in which the victorious armies of the Old Testament and Book of Mormon credited angelic support and their own righteousness for their enemies’ defeat.

According to the lesson material, if you didn’t wear your “breastplate of righteousness,” you’d be prone to get a bad guy’s spear right through the heart. So who are the bad guys we were supposed to be fighting in this symbolic battle of life? And if angels of light are helping the good guys, I’d wonder, who was helping the bad guys? And what if a soldier who wanted to fight for the good guys wasn’t quite righteous enough to deserve the company of angels? Well, what I took from the lessons was that you’d then end up having to fight those devils all by yourself without heavenly hosts on your flanks – or worse yet, if your testimony wasn’t quite strong enough, they might even sway you to their side and get you to lose your testimony altogether! Next thing you know, you’d be joining forces with Orcs or Sith Lords in a fight against your former friends.



This bellicose imagery wasn't restricted to an ancient setting; we also heard about the early elders of the modern church who saw the armies of the devil surrounding the cities they travelled to – fiercely opposing the introduction of the gospel message. Now I would think those stories would be just as likely to scare as many kids *out of* serving missions as they would scare *into* serving missions, but in any case, when teachers encourage LDS youth to serve a mission, it is often referred to as joining the Army of the Lord. Well, no army runs around without an enemy to fight, so if *there must needs be opposition in all things*, prospective missionaries had better gird up those loins to get ready for what's about to come at them from the depths of hell!

Maybe it's a guy thing, but as a teenager I picked up on some measure of this sort of martial imagery almost every week in church. I even chose to draw Friberg's Captain Moroni for a school art assignment and hung it up in my room:



The tone in LDS youth meetings may have softened up a bit since that time, but when I was finishing up high school I knew that every generation of twentieth century Americans before me had faced a military draft. Surely my own generation would be no different, I assumed, with the next war in all likelihood being fought against the Russians. I thought I'd get a head start on the inevitable conflict by joining the Air Force; that way I could start climbing the ladder early, and by the time the next war came around, maybe I could view the battlefield from the air as an officer while the infantry from the common ranks had to face the fallout on the ground.

My father and his father before him had both been dismissed from the U.S. Air Force Academy due to medical issues. I planned to finally fulfil their dreams by graduating from the Academy myself...that is, until I realized my poor eyesight would put me on a ground crew instead of being Maverick or Goose. So I ended up opting for BYU as a consolation and waited for Uncle Sam to want a near-sighted engineer badly enough to point his conscriptive finger at me.

Well, the call to battle never came, though I did find myself in a reservist recruiting office a few times over the years debating my patriotic duty. Now I've finally reached an age where I would be more of a liability than an asset to any military operation, so I guess I've dodged that bullet for myself. I do consider myself very lucky in that I never had to fight in a war, but I've just recently had to register my two oldest boys for selective service in the U.S. military. Will one of them want to finally break the cycle of being unfit for the Air Force Academy and decide to apply voluntarily? Will they be as lucky as I was in avoiding a draft? I sure hope that call never comes, but when I hear Trump and Kim Jong-un comparing the size of their buttons, I wonder what the future will hold.

Of course nobody wants to send their kids to war, but when Mormons send their kids out on missions, that analogy is applied proudly: when you're a missionary, you're told that you are engaged in a war in which the overarching prize is the eternal fate of every soul on earth. The stakes are much higher than any worldly battle, and the consequence of failing in that higher cause overshadows all earthly dominions. Even if you were to lose your life in this earthly battle, it would be far better than losing your faith in the eternal battle for your soul.

If that perspective holds any validity, modern missionaries are the paramount freedom fighters on the planet, motivated by the same call to arms as the Army of Heleman:



"We'll Bring the World His Truth"

It is frightening to think that this is how some Mormon missionaries see themselves, but that self-perception certainly isn't limited to the Latter-Day Saint movement. The imagery of sword-wielding zealots abounds across other Christian and non-Christian sects alike.

When a Mormon congregation opens its hymnal to #246 and starts singing the opening lines of "Onward Christian Soldiers," the dual nature of the lyrics may not be apparent within the safe walls of a chapel. Outside of that context, however, the symbolic warfare can become as literal as the crusades; after all, it was the marching anthem of the Ku Klux Klan, and a few transposed words would readily turn it into a jihadi nasheed. If a Muslim congregation sang the same song with their prophet's name inserted, and a crescent substituted for the cross, Christian listeners might take offense; yet the artists formerly known as MoTab proudly shout those lyrics to the world, pronouncing the glorious spoils of victory.

Any glorification of warfare itself – like the above cartoon – ought to reflect the real costs. In my weekly assignments to nursing homes as a young missionary, I met veterans of both world wars. Some were losing their minds due to old age, while others had lost their minds long ago as young soldiers and never recovered. In many cases, they provided uninhibited, unfiltered accounts of war that portrayed the stark difference between the recruitment posters and the reality on the ground. War is hell, that's for sure! They spoke of death and destruction raining from the sky in the form of shellfire and chemical clouds. Those who fought in the trenches told me about hand to hand combat with bayonets that ultimately yielded a gruesome scene with grown men screaming in fear and horror while trudging through rivers of blood, excrement, maggots, and rotting limbs.

That's the real, gangrenous truth that never quite makes it into Christian hymnals, Uncle Sam's *I Want You* posters, or Friberg's paintings!





The Great War

The two world wars of the twentieth century are prioritized a bit differently around the globe, depending on your country of origin. Americans tend to focus on scenes like Pearl Harbor, D-Day, the liberation of the concentration camps, and the mushroom cloud as the most iconic images of warfare – all pointing attention to the Second World War. The trench warfare of World War 1, on the other hand, seems to get dismissed as a fruitless stalemate.

In many of the British Commonwealth countries, however, World War 1 tends to get more of a focus. In Australia, in particular, almost every shire and suburb has a memorial to the “Great War.” Even the smallest Australian communities lost a substantial number of their young men in that war – at over ten times the U.S. casualty rate. ANZAC Day – which is equivalent to Memorial Day in the U.S. – is filled with dawn memorial services across Australia that tend to focus on the losses sustained during the First World War.

The galvanizing campaign for Australians is the Battle of Gallipoli. I don’t remember ever having heard the word *Gallipoli* before moving to Australia in my late thirties, but I think you’d be hard pressed to find an Australian child – even a pre-schooler – who is not familiar with the term.

The battle appears frequently in Australian media, including feature movies – many of which include scenes depicting young soldiers in the trenches being sent “over the top” to their deaths in no-mans-land. I remember a scene in one of these movies that really struck me: a single-file line of soldiers was shown in a narrow trench, each soldier waiting his turn to climb a single ladder. Their commander stood next to the ladder with a whistle in his mouth. Each wave of soldiers stood briefly at the bottom of the ladder, waiting to hear the whistle blow. At the sound of the whistle, each soldier in the queue climbed the ladder and fell onto a growing pile of bodies thanks to an Ottoman machine gun position mounted directly opposite their trench.

Every one of these soldiers knew in that moment that his choices were very limited: he could either die on the battlefield or live as a court-martialed deserter. With just a second or two to make the last decision of their lives, these soldiers would have been torn between honor and betrayal, bravery and cowardice, obedience and survival. At some point in this particular movie, the commander faced his own son in the next wave of the line-up, and despite the emotional struggle that ripped him apart when he looked his son in the eye, he felt compelled to blow the whistle just the same – from his perspective making the only decision that could preserve dignity for both of them. Needless to say, his son didn’t fare any better than the rest of the doomed lot.

The loss of a young soldier is equally tragic on both sides of a conflict, regardless of the ultimate victor, but what made this father’s loss even more disheartening was that the Gallipoli campaign was a military disaster for the Allies – in hindsight, a retreat might have actually been a more effective strategy.

A few months into the Gallipoli conflict, some of the troops suspected that they were engaged in an unwinnable struggle, but of course neither a foot soldier nor his immediate commander would have been given any choice in the matter. The thoughts and emotions that would have been swirling around in every soul at the sound of the whistle would have been especially agonizing for those who realized they were fighting a losing battle.

Westerners who watch movies about the First World War may assume that the Allied characters are fighting on the right side of the conflict; the presumption is that they are the good

guys and not the bad guys. In that particular campaign, however, the lines between good guys and bad guys are much blurrier than in the later fights against fascism. There are no public celebrations of the sweeping Blitzkrieg victories across Poland, for example, but the battle of Gallipoli is currently memorialized in Turkey just the same as it is among the Allied nations who were their bitter enemies at the time. If the movie about Gallipoli played in an Istanbul cinema today, each of the Allied soldiers heading over the top, including the Commander's son, would be viewed as one of the evil invaders. And the Ottoman victory in this campaign – with the accompanying defeat of the Allies – remains a prime source of Turkish pride over a century later.

As a civil engineer, I've been fascinated by attempts to span the Dardanelles Strait that connects the Gallipoli Peninsula to neighboring Canakalle in what is now Turkey. Historical crossings of the strait represent some of the greatest engineering achievements on record, but the last successful bridge – built under Xerxes thousands of years ago – was subsequently destroyed in a storm. A record-breaking replacement bridge is now finally being completed. Western banks headquartered in the countries that suffered defeat in the Gallipoli campaign are funding the bridge, which has been named the "1915 Canakalle Bridge" to commemorate the Ottoman victory over the ANZACS and their allies.

In this case, Western powers are seeing their own loss commemorated in the bridge's name without expressing any objection to the reference. The other campaign launched by the Ottoman government at the same time, however, was more sinister in nature, and any attempt to celebrate the success of that operation would surely be met with international resistance today. The term *genocide* was actually coined with the expulsion and massacre of the Armenians in mind, an atrocity that began with a precursor of Krystallnacht, shattering lives across Constantinople on the same night as the Allied troop landing in Gallipoli. Should a celebration of that "victory" be allowed?

Part of my reason for writing analogies like the story of Corporal Crowe is to force myself to take a step back before making any assumptions on who the good guys and bad guys are. The Ottoman soldiers who fought and died in the campaign against the ANZACs were engaged in a defensive battle trying to save their capital of Constantinople from foreign invasion; it is thus no surprise that the city's defenders are considered to be martyrs and local heroes in their own right. One might argue about who struck the first blow, but protecting one's homeland is generally seen as a perfectly justifiable reason to take up arms no matter where you reside. So if you look at an Ottoman gunner in a World War I movie, do you see a good guy or a bad guy? To me it is very easy to justify the individual cause of an infantry soldier on either side of this conflict – and to understand any internal doubts that might arise as to whether they're fighting for a just cause.

So what about the Ottoman soldiers who made the first Armenian arrests in Constantinople? Good guys or bad guys? Those soldiers had been told that the Armenians were collaborating with the Allied invaders and likely believed that their incarceration was just as necessary to save Constantinople from foreign occupation as the coastal artillery. Did the arresting officers know at the time that this initial wave of arrests was just the beginning of a horrible war crime that would culminate in mass executions and widespread slaughter? I doubt it, but the justification for their initial actions was certainly packaged up under the same fear and paranoia that allowed the holocaust, lynchings in the American South, the Bosnian War, and so many other ethnic conflicts to explode throughout history. When a propaganda machine paints a group of people as dangerous bad guys, good guys can become bad guys themselves when what starts out of as self-preservation culminates in self-righteous domination. So how is the average foot soldier supposed to know the difference between the real bad guys and the wrongfully accused bad guys? And what do you do when you find out you've been misinformed?

In the music video for the song "Some Nights," soldiers on both sides of a conflict are fighting for the things they love – only to find that they're taking away the same thing from their counterparts. Nate Ruess sings these lines in uniform:

*Oh, Lord, I'm still not sure what I stand for
Most nights I don't know...
So this is it? I sold my soul for this?
Washed my hands of that for this?*



For me, what started out as merely examining the accuracy of my map has now expanded into questioning the entire cause of the supposed “good-guy” movement I have spent my life fighting for; those *Fun* lyrics now hit home as I debate whether or not to return to my former position after having been reprimanded by High Command.

I am that man. If I can now insert myself back onto that allegorical battlefield, I am Corporal Crowe. I answered the call of duty. I stormed the beach. I served my time in the trenches. I’ve been up the ladder myself, and I helped to advance the front line. I went back to the trenches as a decorated officer, and they put me in charge of a few good men. It all seemed to be going according to plan until they gave me a whistle of my own...but no periscope. I had been fine following the directive to go over the top myself without first having had a good look around, trusting that those in command had done their homework. But I wasn’t about to blow my new whistle and send others over without taking a glimpse at the battlefield myself. So I cobbled together some trench shovels and shaving mirrors into my own makeshift periscope; when I finally had a look for myself, I was alarmed to find that the maps we were following were just plain made up, having absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with the real conditions on the ground.

I felt like my periscope observations would have benefitted the entire army battalion, but my view was dismissed as irrelevant by those in command; nobody needed my input, I was told, because my superiors already knew the whole situation perfectly. The hierarchy of command was set up to disseminate orders down from the top and not the other way around. Junior officers like me were expected to just do as we were told; and the enlisted men who served under me were expected to do the same.

I was surprised at the wholesale dismissal of my findings, but as I thought back through my military career, I realized that I had never actually provided any feedback on any situation at all, because no commander had ever asked me for my input. The more I thought about it, an official policy that prevented any ground-based intelligence from ever being passed up the chain of

command seemed awfully dangerous. Given the disparity I had observed between the maps and the battlefield, it certainly didn't feel like a safe or even a remotely sane manner in which to wage a war.

Of course, nobody gets to call time-out in the trenches, but I decided to take one anyway, knowingly risking further casualties as a result of my indecision while I dug a little deeper and tried to make up my mind about what to do next.

I started my investigation by dumping out my Doughboy Duffel Bag and taking a hard look at the orders I had been following. All along I had been told that these orders came directly from high command, issued personally to me by those who had the perspective, the experience, and the authority to make life's most crucial decisions on my behalf. As I dug out my orders and examined them more closely, however, I realized that they were actually carbon copies of orders that had been recycled from previous conflicts. I couldn't believe I had never looked at these form letters closely enough to notice the little snippets with my name that had been meticulously cut out and pasted over the opening lines. I had also overlooked a heap of anachronisms showing that the orders came from completely unrelated battles – some referencing campaigns in which my predecessors had suffered defeat at a tremendous loss; yet similar orders were being issued and followed all around me without question. The orders I followed had been enforced with constant repetition, but as far as I could tell from my new vantage point, they bore no current relevance to the actual war that was raging – or even to my made-up maps!

When I faced the men in the command bunker and challenged them regarding the discrepancies, they had no explanations to offer...other than to tell me that General Mapmaker knew best and couldn't possibly mislead me. There couldn't be a mistake, I was told, because the General couldn't make mistakes; even admitted mistakes that showed that the General actually could make mistakes weren't really mistakes after all. If the maps were made up, they were made up on purpose. If the orders were outdated, it was all a part of the overall strategy for ensuring victory. If previous losses looked like defeats, they were actually victories in the grand scheme of things because the losses were necessary diversions at the time – meant to test the loyalty of the troops.

Under threat of a tribunal, those who received orders were obliged to follow them, regardless of their accuracy, because the whole system would fall apart without that overall order. The battle was ongoing, I was told, and we would see the wisdom in that order once the overall war was all over. In the meantime, the message was clear: "You can't handle the truth!"

Whatever the case, I was expected to profess the accuracy of the orders, the maps, and the battle plan to my little platoon; but as I looked more closely at the history of previous conflicts, I realized that some of them had ended in defeat precisely because the troops had been following outdated orders and erroneous maps. Some of these battles had been entirely winnable if we had only adjusted the battle plan to fit the changing topography. In other cases where the battle had been won in the end, I found that we had secret alliances with the enemy or had shifted sides in the middle of the conflict.

I also found plenty of cases where the commanders realized and even admitted that they shouldn't have issued the outdated orders in the first place; yet they continued to re-issue them to new recruits. Some standing generals had ultimately acknowledged that those who received certain orders probably would have been better off ignoring them, and that lives would have been saved if someone had stood up with the courage to question their orders at the time; but the morale of the troops demanded that we continue on the path of absolute, unquestioning obedience.

I was absolutely confused: instead of learning a lesson from the real context of historical losses, the concealment of the whole picture was leading to dire mistakes that kept getting repeated again and again.

“You don’t have the full picture,” the commanders countered, “Only we do!”

I slowly but compliantly wandered back to the trenches, but when I looked back out across the battlefield, I realized that I couldn’t even distinguish the good guys from the bad guys anymore. My patrol gathered around me, awaiting further instructions, and I knew the time-out was over; it was time to call the next play.

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Now this is the point where the back story is brought into the present tense:

My kids are staring me in the face as I’m about to send them out into the unknown, no-man’s-land of the world. I’ve got a whistle in my hand and my boys are climbing the ladder, waiting to charge. All around them, their brothers-in-arms are singing the *Saturday’s Warrior* fight song:

*Strangers from a realm of light who’ve forgotten the memory of their former life,  
The purpose of their call.  
And so they must learn why they’re here and who they really are,  
Like silver trees against the storm who will not bend with the wind or the change,  
But stand to fight the world alone!  
Rising in the might to win the battle raging in the hearts of men.*

*A brave and noble fiery youth,  
Who’s not afraid to die for truth.  
These are the few, the warriors saved for Saturday,  
The last day of the world.*

If, like me, you have been “promoted” to parenthood, and you are now holding a whistle of your own, do you blow it anyway when your own, enlisted son looks you in the eye on his way up the ladder, ready to *bring the world his truth*? What if you thought you had a map that would prepare him for the fight ahead, but you now realize that map is erroneous? Do you doubt your doubts, questioning your own view of the battlefield and trusting that someone with a wider perspective has flown above you? Do you tell your son to charge ahead because you absolutely believe your cause to be absolutely true? Or because you believe that your own sacrifice – and the Abrahamic offering of your own children – will somehow promote that cause despite the erroneous intelligence? Do you blow that whistle just because you’ve been told to or just because that’s how things have always been done before? Do you encourage those under your command to follow their own conscience if they decide to desert? Or do you entice, bribe, coerce, or otherwise push your kids over the top – whatever it takes – because you believe that strongly in the legitimacy of your end cause?

I now find myself at that critical turning point. I could go one way or another, and I’m unsure which ending to choose here; I legitimately do not know whether blowing the whistle is the right thing to do. I have received a direct order to do so. Do I comply or defy?

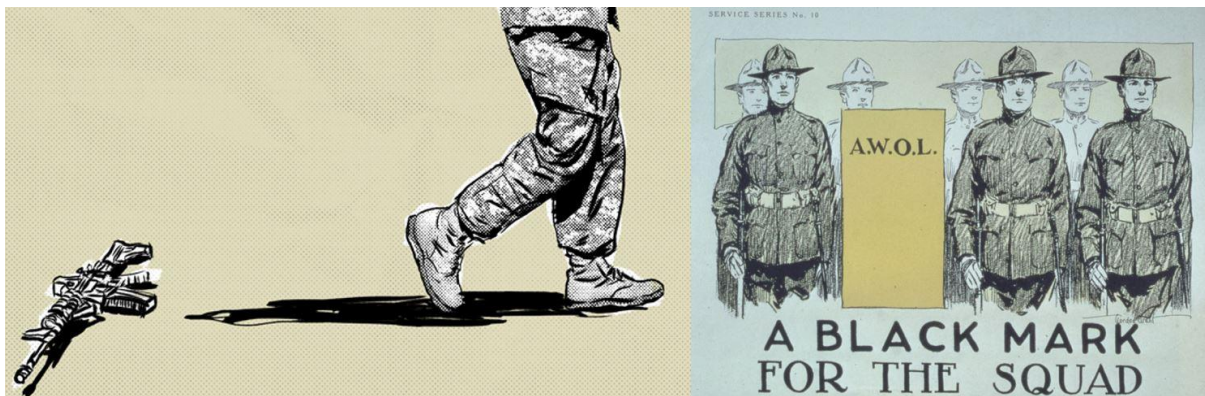
With the image of the whistle, I realize that I dove back into an *analogy* here in the *reality* section, but the battles I’m referring to are not just symbolic: they were and are absolutely real! In a very literal sense, those faithful Mormons who received orders from their priesthood leaders during

the time of Mountain Meadows, Nazi Germany, the civil rights movement, Proposition 8, and other critical turning points had to decide whether to challenge those orders or obey them – and whether to propagate the directives within their own jurisdiction, be it among their family, their quorum, or their ward constituency.

I've never fought in a war myself, and I really have no business pretending that I can relate to the horrors that real soldiers have faced in combat. Seasoned war veterans would likely laugh at the comparisons I am drawing here, along with the insinuation that my life of comfort bears any relevance whatsoever to a real battlefield. But my Mormon upbringing tells me that my current battle matters many times more than any trench warfare ever could. This isn't just about the green fields of France: entire planets, endless posterity, and eternal kingdoms are at stake here!

As for myself, I have tangible, written orders sitting in my file cabinet in the form of a mission call, a patriarchal blessing, church callings and other milestone moments. Some of the orders are merely invitations, but they lay out the unacceptable consequences of non-compliance, which essentially makes them direct orders in my book.

The latest order that I have received is the most consequential of all. With this order, I now find myself in the quagmire of an unwinnable stalemate with just two choices ahead: Conformism or Mormonschism?



If I truly believed a cause to be just, I would hope that I would willingly give my life for it and put my shoulder to that wheel. But when my commanding officer puts fake maps in my hands, I can no longer accept his authority nor his determination that the cause is just. I understand that he may have no capacity to question the orders that have come down to him. But I do believe that if he and others in authority took an objective look at the available intelligence, they would understand my reluctance to blow the whistle. And they would understand that we would all be around to fight a more relevant battle if the entire battalion were to retreat from the unsustainable positions that we have dug ourselves into.

I have been asked to accept a calling. And I have turned that down. I have been beseeched to come back to the fold, and I have now decided to defy that command. I am violating a direct order by refusing to pick up my weapon and by throwing my whistle into the mud. Perhaps some will view that as treason or cowardice. Perhaps I will be accused of acting out of pure self-interest. But I've come to realize that the hill we're fighting for isn't something I even want in the end.

Is it really any different for my fellow brethren-in-arms who faithfully follow orders today? What if they decide to accept the commander's authority, climb the ladder when the whistle blows, and storm the big hill ahead? What if they successfully reach the high ground and raise the flag? Will

they be reveling in their success, declaring the severe casualties along the way to be heroic? If so, what if they then look around and realize it's not a position anyone wanted in the first place?

One drastic realization that is guiding my decision is the fact that the end goal of the final Mormon battle plan isn't something I'm even remotely interested in. A glorious future is promised to those who obey...but it is one that most everyday Mormons don't even want. If you doubt that hypothesis, go ahead and take a poll outside a Mormon chapel next Sunday and ask the question, "Are you looking forward to polygamy?" What would the results show? Here's my educated guess based on the comments I've heard in Sunday school classes that cover the topic:

*Men:* "Uh, no..."

*Women:* "Hell no!"

Are the men lying and secretly want lots of wives? Do the women hate the idea but believe that God will someday bless them with enough humility to accept the principle? If not, why fight for an end result that you reject wholesale now? Of course, it all gets blamed on a limited, mortal perspective, but it seems a bit ironic that Mormons continually state their opposition to a doctrine they claim to adhere to as an eternal principle. Essentially, Mormon scriptures paint a picture of what victory will bring to those who wage a successful war, and the soldiers all cringe at the image.

No thanks!

In the meantime, I plan to sketch out my own map and plot my own course, rejecting exclusivity and manipulative measures along the way. I'll rip that whistle from the chain around my neck and leave it far behind.

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The following observation from an account of Australians in Gallipoli summarises my feeling about not just trench warfare, but so many other realms of politics, religion, history, and humanity:

"However, for all the gallantry and selfless sacrifice offered by Australians in this war, it must also be remembered that throughout World War 1 there was constant, unnecessary waste of human life. Bryce Courtenay writes about the sacrifice of the Light Horsemen in his introduction to "An Anzac's Story" by Roy Kyle A.I.F (p. 152),

"Their gallantry will never be forgotten, and the stupidity of the commanding generals must never be forgiven. This was a war where too many of the beautiful young of every nation were sacrificed willy-nilly by old men smelling of whisky, with the brass buttons on their tunics stretched to breaking point over their paunches. Dyspeptic colonels and generals, spluttering and mumbling through their tobacco-stained moustaches, watched men die through the rubber eyepieces of their field glasses and pronounced the battle glorious."

Throwing it back to Nathan's question: "Am I that man?"

I sure hope not.

But even if I'm not, I still have to ask myself a second question: "Have I been taking my orders from that man?"

I'm afraid so.

Well, not anymore!

Chapter 5. Lockdown

My Analogy: Active Shooter

“Thou shalt not ... kill, nor do anything like unto it” (D&C 59:6)
unless...

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Before I dive into the next analogy, I wanted to share a real story that really struck home for me. I’m not a hugely active Facebook user, and I don’t tend to get many notifications from my phone’s Facebook app, so I was surprised when it started dinging like crazy at 1 am on the 11<sup>th</sup> of June, 2014. I wondered what might be affecting so many of my friends. When I started scrolling through the posts, I was shocked to see terms like “active shooter”, “lockdown”, “bodybags”...

Even more disconcerting was that this was all coming from Reynolds High School in our former hometown of Troutdale, Oregon, which would have been our kids’ school had we stayed in the U.S. At the very moment that our kids were fast asleep down under in Western Australia, we were reading that their childhood friends and former classmates on the other side of the world were being herded out to safe zones to evade the gunfire.

My wife and I anxiously watched each new post come in until we saw one from the police commissioner announcing that the shooter had tragically ended his own life after killing at least one student and injuring a teacher. At least the siege was over, but I kept checking for updates in a futile attempt to explain the inexplicable. There were some conflicting reports between the news articles and the social media updates that we heard, but I tried piecing together a timeline to make sense of it all:

As it turned out, a radicalized youth named Yarid Mu’alla-Paadjit had taken the lessons from his imam too far and decided to take his self-righteous anger out on his classmates. He had enough ammunition to inflict a whole lot more damage; mere luck had prematurely ended Yarid’s planned assault and thwarted his apparent goal of taking many more lives.

Investigators raided Yarid’s home immediately after the shooting and confiscated his journal, which included some rather shocking revelations. Yarid had written that he couldn’t stand to hear his public-school classmates blaspheming the name of Allah. On top of that, they ate pork and took other substances the Prophet had declared to be harām – or unclean.

Witnessing what in his eyes were reprehensible, capital crimes among his peers every day at school apparently made Yarid's own blood boil over, and some of his fellow students had begun to notice that he was getting more and more irritable. Just a week before the shooting, for example, he had caused quite a stir in his high school history class when he gave a speech about Hitler and implied that the Jews somehow deserved their fate in the extermination camps. He didn't leave any clues as to what led him down this line of thinking, but perhaps he saw it as some sort of divine retribution for the crimes against his own people that were documented in his holy books.

Some of the guidance for his extreme beliefs seems to have come not just from the Qur'an but from additional "ahadith" and further proclamations that filled his governing sharia with stories and statutes condoning the practice of shedding someone's blood to pay for their sins. All the authorities could reveal was that at some point Yarid took it upon himself to kill the "infidels" in his own high school, as he described them in his journal. As long as it was done in Allah's name, he must have reasoned, he would be saving himself by bravely stepping in like a foot soldier in a justified jihad; from what I read online, his scriptures also mention that killing an infidel carries the added benefit of saving the sinner from further sin, so he would actually be doing the infidel a service. Convinced that these actions would be fully sanctioned by his maker, this win-win interpretation must have really struck a chord with Yarid.

Every morning before school the teenagers from his Islamic Center would go to the mosque and learn lessons straight out of the Qur'an – and then go to their public schools and see everyone doing the complete opposite of the principles they had just learned. When school girls dressed immodestly and did things forbidden by fatwās, for example, their behavior didn't measure up to Allah's expectations of virginity as taught by the imam. At the same time, the imam taught from scriptures that included punishing promiscuity and other transgressions with a whole range of divinely decreed death penalties – some quite brutal, but fully approved and justified in Allah's eyes. To make matters worse, these same scriptures also taught of the eternal benefits and rewards promised to the executioner who commits his act in Allah's service.

Most Muslim students were equipped to cope with this dichotomy and were able to separate the ancient scriptural stories from what was being taught as the current will of Allah, but not so with Yarid. He just couldn't take the hypocrisy anymore, so he set into action his plan to kill the heathen infidels in his school. Unfortunately for the community, his family had a readily available arsenal of military-grade weapons at their disposal. On top of that, he had attended training camps where one of his shaikhs – an elder in his congregation – helped teach him to shoot with deadly accuracy.

So three days before graduation in 2014, Yarid opened his family's weapons cabinet, put an assault rifle into a guitar case, and loaded a duffel bag full of ammunition. He boarded the school bus and entered the school's gymnasium, ready to submit to Allah's will and spread the message of hate and intolerance that he saw justified in his holy books.

As he was suiting up in the locker room, he was apparently surprised by a young soccer player named Emilio, who became the first casualty of the day when Yarid opened fire. Heroic staff members – including a teacher who had taken his own bullet wound in the crossfire – were able to warn others and put the school into lockdown. In the end, Yarid found himself backed into a corner of the locker room from which he saw only one way out: the self-inflicted gunshot that ended his own life.



Over the next few hours, parents and students anxiously waited for news of their loved ones while the first responders swept the school to ensure that the danger was over. In a strange twist of irony, many of the students had been escorted into a safe room in the mosque across the street from the high school – which happened to be the very same room where students like Yarid had learned lessons about justified decapitations and other punishments for sin from their shaikh.

I was stunned that this chain of events had happened right there in my old community. But what affected me even more was that as the motivation behind this horrific crime came to light, the local Muslim community seemed more worried about how their faith was being viewed than preventing a similar crime from happening again. “Why does a perpetrator’s religion only get brought up when he’s Muslim?” members of his faith wrote in editorials, complaining that they always get singled out and persecuted in these sorts of cases, “You’d never see this sort of finger-pointing if he was Christian!”

The responses were alarmingly defensive – accusing the press of discrimination and condemning them for having even mentioned Yarid’s religion at all. They argued that this was an isolated mental health issue that had nothing whatsoever to do with religious indoctrination.

Now I certainly don’t have any answers regarding the balance of Yarid’s motives, but I’m sure both mental health and indoctrination played a role. On the mental health side of things, I read later that Emilio’s mom, Jennifer, started a charity combating mental illness in Emilio’s honor. The Reynolds High School soccer team now plays in an Emilio Hoffman memorial tournament, likewise raising awareness for mental health. Memorial plaques in the school hallways hopefully serve as preventive reminders to check in on each other. But as far as the role that indoctrination may have played in this crime, I have no idea whether any similar initiatives have been undertaken. Did this tragic event cause any introspection in the local Muslim community, for example? Were there any apologies or changes to the way lessons are taught? I sincerely hope so, but given my displacement, I wouldn’t have any way of knowing the answer.

One thing that is clear is that those who knew Yarid as a nice young man found the news excruciatingly hard to accept. “That wasn’t him,” a family friend said to a reporter, “that wasn’t the Yarid I knew!” Nobody can know what sort of regret or second thoughts went through Yarid’s mind while he was isolated in a toilet stall, weighing out his options after his plan had been foiled. He may have been begging Allah for forgiveness, willing to trade anything for the chance to start the day over, or maybe his mind had just plain failed him. Whatever the case, it is an utter tragedy on all fronts. But the prevention of a future incident can’t focus on that moment in the locker room or even on the moment the gun cabinets were opened; effective intervention would have been needed much earlier in this story, perhaps while deranged thoughts were being penned in his journal or perhaps while lessons with violent subject matter were being taught in the mosque. I just hope something has changed in the meantime to prevent a repetition of that day.

I didn’t know Emilio myself, but I taught his soccer teammates and even his girlfriend in Sunday school and music classes during my time in Troutdale. I knew from their social media posts how deeply this calamity affected them; being on the other side of the world, though, I didn’t feel there was much I could offer other than sending a consolation letter to those friends who had been affected.

Those horribly inadequate condolences were sent years ago; so where does this leave me today? Both Emilio’s and Yarid’s families have suffered an immense loss, and the last thing I want to

do is re-open wounds that may be just beginning to heal. And I definitely have no business as an outsider stirring up animosity in a community that is striving toward forgiveness.

So why even bring it up so many years after the fact?

Well, I've been studying and searching out different religions lately, and in the process I ran across an upcoming event at a local mosque which will include addresses from some visiting overseas shaikhs. To my amazement, as I did some background research, I found out that one of them is the very same shaikh who taught religious lessons at the Islamic Center next to Reynolds high school – and the very same one who had helped teach Yarid's fellow camp trainees to shoot.

Given the crazy coincidence, I made special arrangements to meet him face to face, and I will now have a singular opportunity to confront him. I have so many questions I'd like to ask him. If you could guide my interview, what do you think I should say? If you could ask him any question, or send him any message, what would it be? Maybe these are a bit watered down for political correctness, but I have been making my own list of questions and requests I want to start with:

- Do you feel like your lessons somehow contributed to this tragedy?
- If so, have you made any changes to the way you teach?
- Do you feel like you owe Jennifer Hoffman an apology?
- Can you please make some changes to help your students separate the literal from the figurative and to distinguish ancient scriptures from current expectations?
- Can you try to convey a more tolerant message to any prior, current, or future students?
- Would you be willing to tone down any talk of jihad to help prevent a similar tragedy in the future?
- Can you try to teach your students the idea that Muslim laws apply only to Muslims – and not to the rest of the world – to people who may be completely unaware that these laws even exist?
- Can you please, please, please back off with the rhetoric about punishment for sin and focus more on Allah's love?

I hope those seem like reasonable queries and appeals given the circumstances, because when I finally get the chance to look that shaikh square in the eyes, I have decided that those are the exactly the questions I am going to ask!

Tonight, when I look in the mirror, I will ask him those questions and demand an answer – and insist that he do something about it!

*Shaikh* means *elder*, and that is who I am in this story. Yes, this is the blow that Nathan has dealt me:

"I am that shaikh!"

## My Reality: Duck, Cover, and Hold

*“Behold the Lord slayeth the wicked to bring forth his righteous purposes” – 1 Nephi 4:13*

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Unfortunately the story about Yarid isn’t an analogous parable at all; it’s actually a completely true story, and the only thing that makes it allegorical is that the following alternative translations have been substituted for certain LDS terms:

- Allah = Heavenly Father
- Mosque = LDS Chapel
- Muslim = Mormon
- Islam = Mormonism
- Islamic Center = Seminary building
- Iman = Bishop or seminary teacher
- Infidel = Sinner
- Qur’an = Book of Mormon
- Training camp = Scout camp
- Ahadith = Journal of Discourses
- Sharia = Scriptures
- Yarid Mu’alla Paadjit = Jared Michael Padgett
- Shaikh = Elder = ...me

Here is the actual story copied from the previous “analogy”, with the translated terms swapped out:

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### Active Shooter

As it turned out, a radicalized [strict LDS] youth named Yarid Mu’alla Paadjit [Jared Michael Padgett] had taken the lessons from his imam [bishop] too far and decided to take his self-righteous anger out on his classmates. He had enough ammunition to inflict a whole lot more damage; mere luck had prematurely ended Yarid’s [Jared’s] planned assault and thwarted his apparent goal of taking many more lives.

Investigators raided Yarid’s [Jared’s] home immediately after the shooting and confiscated his journal, which included some rather shocking revelations. Yarid [Jared] had written that he couldn’t stand to hear his public school classmates blaspheming the name of Allah [taking the name of God in vain]. On top of that, they ate pork [smoked cigarettes] and took other substances the Prophet [Joseph Smith] had declared to be harām — or unclean [against the Word of Wisdom].

Witnessing what in his eyes were reprehensible, capital crimes among his peers every day at school apparently made Yarid’s [Jared’s] own blood boil over, and some of his fellow students had begun to notice that he was getting more and more irritable. Just a week before the shooting, for example, he had caused quite a stir in his high school history class when he gave a speech about Hitler and implied that the Jews somehow deserved their fate in the extermination camps. I don’t know what would have led him down this line of thinking, but perhaps he saw it as some sort of divine retribution for the crimes against his own people [Christians] that were documented in his holy books [the New Testament].

Some of the guidance for his extreme beliefs seems to have come not just from the Qur'an [Book of Mormon] but from additional ahadith [the Journal of Discourses] and further proclamations that filled his governing sharia [scriptural library] with stories and statutes condoning the practice of shedding someone's blood to pay for their sins. All the authorities could reveal was that at some point Yarid [Jared] took it upon himself to kill the "infidels" ["sinners"] in his own high school, as he described them in his journal. As long as it was done in Allah's [God's] name, he must have reasoned, he would be saving himself by bravely stepping in like a foot soldier in a justified jihad [the Camp of Israel]; from what I have read, his scriptures [the Book of Mormon] also mentions that killing a sinner carries the added benefit of saving that sinner from further sin, so he would actually be doing the "infidel" ["sinner"] a service. Convinced that these actions would be fully sanctioned by his maker, it seems like this win-win interpretation would have really struck a chord with Yarid [Jared].

Every morning before school the teenagers from his Islamic Center [ward] would go to the mosque [seminary building] and learn lessons straight out of the Qur'an [Book of Mormon] – and then go to their public schools and see everyone doing the complete opposite of the principles they had just learned. When school girls dressed immodestly and did things forbidden by fatwas [the youth pamphlets], for example, their behavior didn't measure up to Allah's [God's] expectations of virginity [chastity] as taught by the imam [bishop]. At the same time, the shaikhs [seminary teachers] taught from [Old Testament] scriptures that included punishing promiscuity and other transgressions with a whole range of divinely decreed death penalties – some quite brutal, but fully approved and justified in Allah's [God's] eyes. To make matters worse, these same scriptures also taught of the eternal benefits and rewards promised to the executioner who commits his act in Allah's [God's] service.

Most Muslim [Mormon] students were equipped to cope with this dichotomy and were able to separate the ancient scriptural stories from what was being taught as the current will of Allah [God], but not so with Yarid [Jared]. He just couldn't take the hypocrisy anymore, so he set into action his plan to kill the heathens and infidels [non-Mormons] in his school. Unfortunately for the community, his family had a readily available arsenal of military-grade weapons at their disposal. On top of that, he had attended training [Scout] camps where one of his shaikhs – an elder in his congregation [named Krey Hampton] – helped teach him to shoot with deadly accuracy.

So three days before graduation in 2014, Yarid [Jared] opened his family's weapons cabinet, put an assault rifle into a guitar case, and loaded a duffel bag full of ammunition. He boarded the school bus and entered the school's gymnasium, ready to submit to Allah's [God's] will and spread the message of hate and intolerance that he saw justified in his holy books.

As he was suiting up in the locker room, he was apparently surprised by a young soccer player named Emilio, who became the first casualty when Yarid [Jared] opened fire. Heroic staff members – including a teacher who had taken his own bullet wound in the crossfire – were able to warn others and put the school into lockdown. In the end, Yarid [Jared] found himself backed into a corner of the locker room from which he saw only one way out: the self-inflicted gunshot that ended his own life.

Over the next few hours, parents and students anxiously waited for news of their loved ones while the first responders swept the school to ensure that the danger was over. In a strange twist of irony, many of the students had been escorted into a safe room in the mosque [seminary building] across the street from the high school – which happened to be the very same room where students

like Yarid [Jared] had learned lessons about justified decapitations [Nephi beheading Laban] and other punishments for sin from their shakh [Sunday school teacher named Krey Hampton].

I was stunned that this chain of events had happened right there in my old community. But what affected me even more was that as the motivation behind this horrific crime came to light, the local Muslim [Mormon] community seemed more worried about how their faith was being viewed than preventing a similar crime from happening again. “Why does a criminal’s religion only get brought up when he’s Muslim [Mormon]?” members of his faith wrote in editorials, complaining that they always get singled out and persecuted in these cases, “You’d never see this sort of finger-pointing if he was Christian [Lutheran]!”

The responses were alarmingly defensive – accusing the press of discrimination and condemning them for having even mentioned Yarid’s [Jared’s] religion at all. They argued that this was an isolated mental health issue that had nothing whatsoever to do with indoctrination.

Now I certainly don’t have any answers regarding the balance of Yarid’s [Jared’s] motives, but I’m sure both mental health and indoctrination played a role. On the mental health side of things, I read later that Emilio’s mom, Jennifer, started a charity combating mental illness in Emilio’s honor. The Reynolds High School soccer team now plays in an Emilio Hoffman memorial tournament, likewise raising awareness for mental health. Memorial plaques in school hallways serve as preventive reminders to check in on each other. But as far as the role that indoctrination may have played in this crime, I have no idea whether any similar initiatives have been undertaken. Did this tragic event cause any introspection in the local Muslim [Mormon] community, for example? Were there any apologies or changes to the way lessons are taught? I sincerely hope so, but given my displacement, I wouldn’t have any way of knowing the answer.

What I do know is that those who knew Yarid [Jared] as a nice young man found the news excruciatingly hard to accept. “That wasn’t him,” a family friend said to a reporter, “that wasn’t the Yarid [Jared] I knew!” I obviously don’t know what sort of regret or second thoughts went through Yarid’s [Jared’s] mind while he was isolated in a toilet stall, weighing out his options after his plan had been foiled. He may have been begging Allah [God] for forgiveness, willing to trade anything for the chance to start the day over, or maybe his mind had just plain failed him. Whatever the case, it is an utter tragedy on all fronts. But the prevention of a future incident can’t focus on that moment in the locker room or even on the moment the gun cabinets were opened; effective intervention would have been needed much earlier in the story, perhaps while deranged thoughts were being penned in his journal or perhaps while lessons with violent subject matter were being taught in the mosque [church]. I just hope something has changed in the meantime to prevent a repetition of that day.

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You may wish to Google “Reynolds High School shooting,” read the news reports, and tell me if you think I’ve missed the mark with anything I’ve written here. In the end the real story had nothing whatsoever to do with Muslims or mosques or anything remotely Islamic. If there were any religious motives behind the shooting, they would have come entirely from Mormonism – from a community that I was a part of during Jared’s formative years. And looking back on it, I have to admit my role in having been part of the organization and the community that somehow convinced Jared that his classmates were better off dead.

Maybe I shouldn’t beat myself up about that involvement; maybe I should just quietly let it go and secretly hope it was just a one-time anomaly. “It wasn’t my fault, after all,” I could argue, “I never could have known someone would twist the church teachings in that way!”

Well, maybe I could rationalize things along those lines. But even if I could deflect all of the blame for my role in this atrocity, if I did nothing about it and it happened again, could I at that point still deflect the blame?

I do believe that in the end we will find that this sort of deflection *prevents* the *prevention* of future tragedies, and I want to do everything I can to break that cycle.

Maybe the LDS Church as an institution has a responsibility to initiate some sort of change in response to this terrorist act; maybe they've already fulfilled that responsibility somehow in the meantime. I'm sure many tears have been shed for both of the affected families among Mormons and non-Mormons alike; after all, in this case it was two families who lost their sons and brothers. I do hope there has been forgiveness and healing in addition to some preventive changes. I wasn't there, so I can't answer for others; I can only answer for myself.

So how should I go about helping to stop something like this from happening again? I definitely don't want to go around pointing fingers – unless I'm pointing a finger at myself to enact a personal change. And that's a hard process to initiate; acknowledging my part in this tragedy is an extremely uncomfortable admission. Selfishly, I really wish Jared's journal had said something different; because I don't want my friends, family, or colleagues to know that I've been part of something that could inspire this sort of hatred and intolerance. I'd actually prefer to just sweep it under the carpet and cross my fingers that it doesn't happen again somewhere..at least not in a case that hits closely enough to home to implicate me. But that self-serving reaction can't be the answer; at least for myself, some difficult introspection is long overdue here.

And I guess that's the whole point, echoing what Nathan proved with the ewe: how easy it is to condemn others, and how hard it is to point that finger back at yourself!

I don't know if I have any valid responses to the interview questions that I listed above, but I do know that after that day in 2014, I became much more sensitive to the lessons my own kids were learning at church, and I have to admit that there were times I felt the need to step in and tone down inflammatory rhetoric that came from one of their teachers. When my kids hear opinions from those who believe in the exclusivity of their own faith, Jared's actions make me shudder at the thought of them adopting this sort of "us versus them" mentality.

Knowing my complicit guilt in this story, I don't EVER want a single word coming out of my mouth that promotes intolerance or gives any sort of indication that one group of people is somehow superior to another or any more or less deserving of divine love. I don't care what scriptural or doctrinal rationale you throw in front of me, the first step I have taken from this devastating tragedy is to reject that notion entirely.

If you come away from this story claiming that you shouldn't go around blaming an entire religion for the actions of a single extremist member, fine, I'll respect that opinion. But then let's stop blaming Islam for terrorism – or help me understand how this application is any different. If your initial reaction on reading the Muslim version of the story was along the lines of "someone should do something about that!" then why should it be any different when I find the finger pointing back at me? If any readers found it easier to point fingers at the fictional Muslims in this story than the Mormons, maybe it's time to stop the finger-pointing altogether and work on healing and preventive solutions.

This lockdown really shook me to the core. This wasn't just a random story that you read about in the newspaper, shake your head, and then turn the next page to the sports section. Those

affected were our family friends in our old hometown, with the shooter himself having based his misguided intolerance on principles that I helped to disseminate. I want to take that back, and at this point the only way I know how is to put these thoughts into writing.

Perhaps my fellow teachers and youth leaders have adopted some changes and finished the healing process for themselves as it relates to this story; several years have already passed since that tragic day, after all. But as for me, I have just recently begun to recognize my role in promoting the lessons that Jared misunderstood – and that other impressionable young teenagers might misinterpret in the future. And if I could wrap my feelings of regret into a single goal for the future it would be this: if I happen to run into Jennifer Hoffman at some point along the remaining road of this life, I honestly just want to be able to look her in the eyes and let her know that in honor of her fun-loving son, I have made changes in my own attitude and in the messages I promote to help prevent another mother from facing a similar loss.

Unfortunately, I don't think I'm at that point yet, because right up until today, I can't claim to have taken any definitive action along those lines. But I'll try to use this write-up as my first step along that path. This one's for Emilio:



Emilio Hoffman, 1999 – 2014

Jennifer's charity website: [Emilio Inc.: Where Mental Health Matters](#)

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### *Aftermath*

The Reynolds High School shooting barely made the national news, with the number of casualties quickly dwarfed by subsequent school shootings. Internationally, I don't even think it got a single mention; without Facebook, in fact, I probably never would have even heard about it in Australia.

For a year or two after the shooting, I occasionally searched online articles for more information about the case. Being largely absent from the larger media outlets, the only coverage I could find was in local Oregon news sources that would occasionally post an update to the story.

Some of the ensuing developments in the case that I read about in the Portland-area press completely infuriated me, including the fate of the murder weapon and some of the political twists the case took. Now this write-up is about religion, not politics, but in this case, second amendment issues highlighted by the case help frame the overall context of the environment in which Jared was raised.

Within days of the crime, members of Jared's ward and stake were expressing their support for gun rights and their opposition to gun control in social media, diverting attention from the real issues and spinning the arguments off in other directions that had nothing whatsoever to do with the motivation behind the crime itself.

Some of these reactions seemed incredibly insensitive and entirely inappropriate given the circumstances; disturbing as it was to see it turn into a political battle in editorials and social media posts, I was half a world away and eventually I let it slide to the back of my mind...that is, until the case hit the news again about a year after the incident: Without any objection from the members of his ward, Jared's family had sued to get their weapons back, including the murder weapon that belonged to Jared's brother, Liam. This was the very same weapon that was used to kill Emilio. The case went before a judge who was appalled at the notion:

"The thought of the weapons that...were used to commit that horrific crime going back into the community is objectionable," he said, "in sort of a general moral outrage sense."

The press coverage of the court case reported Liam's unemotionally calloused insistence on getting his guns back, even after the judge challenged him with the fact that the weapon may still have blood on it. You would think it would be more appropriate – even if just as a symbolic gesture – that the gun be melted down rather than being taken out for recreational hunting or – God forbid – the commitment of a similar crime in the future.

Liam wanted it back anyway. And in the end, the judge said he was powerless to prevent that from happening. The murder weapon was handed back to Liam for him to use as he saw fit. There was a brief outcry in the press objecting to the decision. In response to the public backlash, a state senator tried to take action and mentioned the possibility of pressing charges against Liam and his family for having improperly secured firearms; the insinuation was met with death threats from supporters of the Padgett family. He immediately dropped the case.

Crazy? Go ahead and Google it – this really happened! I really know these people!

Well, if you were the judge who had to make the call concerning the fate of the murder weapon, how would you have ruled? If you held a press conference in which you could make a statement to the *Brother of Jared* to accompany your ruling, how would you inscribe your blank slate?

"Here you go, all yours!"

Or would you perhaps opt for something a bit more profound – some statement that would allow you to pass Jennifer Hoffman on the street without looking down at your feet in shame?

The right to re-bear these deadly arms wasn't the only divisive political issue with relevance to the case. As the shooting drifted slowly into the past, I started seeing an increasing amount of anti-Muslim rhetoric, some of it originating from members of my own community back in the U.S. I actually have extended family members who would like to see all mosques shut down and Muslims deported and banned from re-entering the United States...while they themselves adhere to a



supposedly Christian faith. Shameful as this sounds, it's not like I'm disclosing anything here that they're not proud to promote themselves. Check it out on Facebook. It's a real thing! This year! Today! In my own hometown! Seriously?

Jared probably heard some of these same disturbing voices, and it scares me to think that he was on track for a military career. Imagine him taking these messages too far as an American sniper, well versed in "America First" propaganda, with his finger on the trigger and his misguided eye looking straight down a high-power scope. His ROTC path could have led to a Middle East deployment where, armed with the deadliest precision assault rifles in Uncle Sam's arsenal, he would have found himself literally fighting those who had declared a holy war on him. How many with his mindset get through the system without prior arrest, and finally get turned loose with full government authorization? We all wish he had made a different decision that morning in Troutdale. But let's follow this one through if he had procrastinated the killing spree: there's a good chance he would have found himself implementing his "us vs. them" mentality with the U.S. government's full backing, becoming an *instrument in their hands* so to say.

One of the primary justifications stated in anti-Islamic social media posts is a fear that Muslims might have a greater inclination or disposition to commit acts of terrorism than your average Christian. When there is a tragedy linked to Islamic zealotry, a common reaction might be to push for a change in teaching methods to help convince adherents that lessons about jihad are figurative and spiritual and should not be taken literally – if not removed from the materials entirely. Well, when these demands come from Mormons, it seems a little introspection might be due.

The whole point of telling the alternate translation of Jared's story above was to highlight the hypocrisy of viewing the real story of that shooting any differently than the Muslim analogy, force a bit of introspection for myself, and to expose the fallacy of extremism originating from any source. If the U.S. government ends up choosing to deport Muslims as the current regime is threatening to do, perhaps they should have a look at the Reynolds High School shooting and deport certain Mormons, too. If you disagree with that approach, then let's all get together and do something to change the rhetoric across the board before the stereotyping even starts.

In reading the reactions in the press, I saw no introspection whatsoever, just Trumpesque name-calling and divisiveness and adherence to the same old tenets. As for me, I feel like I have been as much a part of the village that raised that boy as his bishop or anyone else in the local Mormon community. But the more editorials I read from some of those who are supposedly my brothers and sisters, the more I am inclined to conclude that "these are not my people!"

Perhaps it's ironic that it was precisely because I felt that they *were* my people that I initially clung to a hope that the references to Mormonism in this case would simply go away. Again, I really didn't want to admit to my non-Mormon friends that I was part of a system that could inspire such a heinous crime. One of the toughest questions I have to ask myself today is whether I wanted to brush this story aside because it would paint the LDS Church in an embarrassingly negative light; I'm afraid the answer to that question is a humiliating yes. Misguided as that reaction was, I have to admit that the thought of bad press and a negative perception – perhaps subconsciously – made me want to sweep this crime under the carpet.

When Jared's membership in the LDS Church came to light – well before the revelations about his motivation – I wonder how many other Mormons like me thought to themselves, "Oh crap, he's a Mormon!" (Or perhaps rather "Oh flip, it's an LDS boy!") hoping that his religion had, in fact, been unrelated to his mental illness and that the references would subside. I certainly wish the

detectives who confiscated his journals had found something different as the investigation continued, but the contents made it clear that Jared's religious views weren't only relevant, they directly guided his actions on that dark day. Double flip!

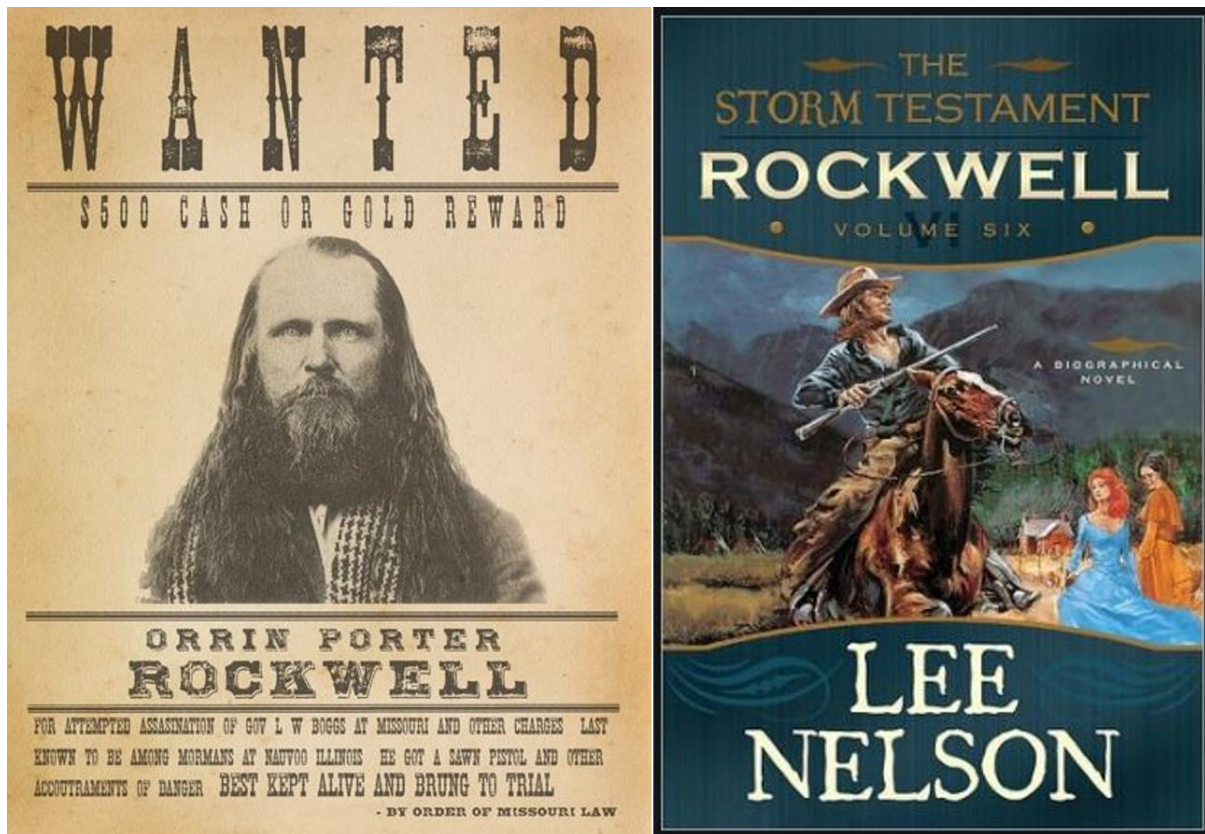
Yes, it's natural to try to dodge a finger that is pointed in our direction. Fellow ward members who were pressed for answers by interrogating reporters immediately blamed Jared's issues on his parents' divorce, for example, subtly highlighting the need to hold even faster to the tenets of the Family Proclamation. Some interviews essentially turned into a warning of what can happen when parents let go of the iron rod. But simply ignoring the obvious religious connections in this case cannot be the answer. When we duck and hide and fail to address the violent doctrines and practices that have motivated this and other similar crimes in the past, we undermine opportunities to effect positive change. Maybe I can't be held responsible for my inadvertent complicity in the formation of Jared's opinions about righteousness and punishment. But if a Mormon shooter emerged again, I most certainly can and should be held responsible for keeping my mouth shut and wishing it away instead of raising a stink and trying to help change how things are taught.

When a company official takes a bribe, the company may want to cover the story up rather than expose a culture of corruption. When a safety violation occurs on a construction site, no contractor wants to publicly reset their "days without injury" clock. When environmental standards are breached with no regulator in sight, a violator may be hesitant to report the infraction to the authorities. It's a classic battle in these cases: you *want* to keep it quiet, but you *need* to make it public. I am an engineer, and I sometimes make mistakes in my work. Sometimes other engineers have made lesser mistakes that have resulted in fatal structural failures. I can understand an initial inclination to bury those mistakes in an attempt to preserve individual or company reputations, but I would fight cover-up tendencies for the industry as a whole in order to allow me and so many other practicing engineers to learn from those mistakes. If you cover them up, someone else is bound to repeat them!

But what if an institution's reputation will be tarnished in the process, should we still blow the whistle? What if lives are being lost and the root cause of the tragedy would expose an institution's root ties to the motivation behind a crime. Should the story be told? Hell yes, this is not about reputation, this is about prevention! Burying the real story results in a denial of the real cause-and-effect connections. In the long-term, an institution's overall mission, if valid, will benefit more from disclosure and recognition of problematic elements than from denial.

In this case I have finally decided to confront the man in the mirror and ask myself the hardest of those interview questions, removing image as a factor at all. I'm not quite sure how I will respond to the self-interrogation, but I do promise to turn over every seer stone if that's what it takes. Things that have been swept under the rug for fear of reputational damage may need a fresh look, come what may. If a hundred potential investigators slam their door on the missionaries after looking more deeply into the role that indoctrination played in this case, but one mother is saved from Jennifer's pain, so be it!

My own grandfather's grandfather sat in prison on a murder charge for a killing that was inspired by religious retribution. This does hit home, and a closer look at the context in these cases can be painful. Mormon scripture includes plenty of justifications for using weapons to protect your home or your homeland, but history has shown that self-defense can quickly give way to pre-emptive strikes that are likewise justified by claims of self-preservation. Vigilantes like the "Destroying Angel," Porter Rockwell, are revered by Mormons and vindicated by an overarching, righteous mandate, even when they strike the first blow.



Have a look at Krakauer's *story of violent faith* if the Padgett case appears to be isolated or unrelated to extremist acts in other sects. Krakauer rightly question how the implementation of Brigham Young's death edicts makes Mormon extremists any different from those taking their orders from Al-Qaeda or the Taliban. In the Lafferty Brothers' case highlighted by Krakauer, practicing Latter-day Saints could claim, "that's not us" and point their finger at the offshoot fundamentalists, who could rightly turn the accusation around and ask which church is the offshoot and which is the real thing. Based on what I know about early LDS history, I'd certainly say that question is up for debate!

Mormons are supposed to be proud of their Mormonism and are expected to pronounce their beliefs to the world. In my twenties and thirties, my religion became an integral part of my identity that I was happy to let shine, but back in high school, I really didn't want anyone to know I was Mormon. I certainly wasn't out trying to convert my friends, and I came up with all sorts of stories at school each morning to cover up the fact that I had just come from seminary. But one day I got caught while giving a friend a ride home after track practice. He got in the car, threw a Book of Mormon at me and said, "this thing can't be true!" As it turned out he had seen the Book of Mormon that I kept under my seat for seminary, silently "borrowed" it, and had started reading it at home the day before. Just a few pages into the book, he had run across the murder of Laban at the hands of a supposedly righteous prophet of God. He was unable to reconcile the violation of hard-set rules inscribed into the stone tablets by that same God's finger and concluded that Mormonism was thus a sham.

My friend was Catholic, but I was sure I knew more about his creed than he did, having spent most of my childhood in a Bavarian epicentre of Catholicism. In addition, I had just spent two years of seminary studying the biblical basis of his own catechism and at least knew enough accounts of widespread, Old Testament slaughters to counter any attack on Nephi's slaying of a single soul.

“Go read your own Bible,” I told him, “God does it over and over again.”

I can't remember if I quoted the verses verbatim or paraphrased them, but I certainly brought up the story behind God's command as recorded in Deuteronomy: “You shall not leave alive anything that breathes. But you shall utterly destroy them.”

If God could command one of these acts, why not the other? Looking back on it now, I'm ashamed that I used the genocide of every man, woman and child at the hands of Joshua's army to justify Laban's point-blank decapitation. Little did I know at the time, someday I would come to the conclusion that neither one had anything to do with God. [And I guess even more importantly, that neither one actually happened as biblical scholars have now largely agreed is the case with the utter destruction of Canaanite cities.]

My own grandfather wrote a book about the crimes of the Catholic Church, and I had no lack of knowledge about officially sanctioned incidents that in my eyes superseded Laban's beheading many times over. I had visited medieval torture chambers staffed by the Pope's executioners and read enough accounts of the crusades and the Inquisition to arm myself with plenty of ammunition for this sort of a debate. If he wanted to attack my own church, I felt confident I could strike back with whatever force needed to deflect attention away from my ties to religious violence. In the end, neither one of us was motivated enough about religion to take it any further. We called the matter a draw at the time, but when I entered the Missionary Training Center a few years later, I was still armed with the defensive mentality that sprung from these sorts of encounters.

Arriving at the MTC was a surreal experience. I was no longer a loner in my beliefs; all around me were like-minded cadets in God's Army. Some of the large group meetings really got the whole battalion motivated and inspired. We called it the spirit, but I wondered if I could distinguish that spirit from just plain bravado in unison. Looking back on it now, while we were strutting along all pumped up after an apostle's speech, I wonder what would have happened if some look-alike imposter posing as that apostle were to pull aside some of the fervent missionaries and tell them how special they are. What if he then escorted them to a special room in the temple and told them God had a sacred, secret calling for them? Then, after a big pep talk, what if he took aside each one individually and asked them to strap on a suicide vest in Danite fashion, perhaps targeting someone who posed a greater threat to the modern Kingdom than Laban of old?

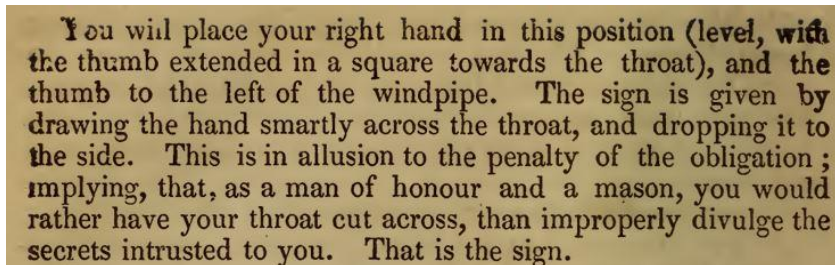
How many would comply? Perhaps not all – and hopefully not many – but given the similar emotions inspired by political rallies and other crowd-sourced persuasions that have historically prompted so many counter-intuitive, unconscionable acts, I'm afraid the answer is not zero. We would all like to think that we are better than ISIS, and perhaps we could hope that the “spirit of discernment” would kick in; but sad experience (e.g., Mountain Meadows) has shown the discernment test to be horribly inadequate, particularly when coupled with a belief in eternal punishment for non-compliance and in eternal rewards for submissively following orders.

Demented as it sounds, the MTC drive-by kidnapping scenario could actually be tested, and you could arrive at the statistically relevant proportion of absolute adherence within the missionary population. Mormons would likely abhor the thought of undertaking an experiment like this. But why couldn't it happen for real? Holy scripture proudly proclaims that God demanded such allegiance in the past; after all, the Christian world largely reveres those who obeyed similar orders without question, bringing the temple pillars a-tumblin' down on themselves and their enemies alike.

So for those who believe that the God whispering edicts to Russell M. Nelson in his dreams today is the same being who commanded the wholesale slaughter of entire populations as punishment for past or future sins, how can we guarantee that a similar command won't be issued tomorrow to test our devotion?

Some scriptural accounts of violence might be passed off as figurative references or perhaps attributed to ancient, outdated customs without modern pertinence. In most religions, adherents can blur the lines between allegories and factual events, preventing archaic edicts from being enforced today; but Mormon history is full of disturbingly literal and relatively recent directives issued by a perceived mouthpiece of God, leading to acts of vengeance that have been carried out in keeping with binding temple oaths.

Thankfully, the most vengeful rhetoric has been removed from the current Mormon hymns and temple rites, but the violent symbolism still remains to this day. Rather than commit the cardinal sin of quoting directly from the standing Mormon endowment ceremony, I'll include an excerpt from a 19th century publication about Masonic rituals as one example:



You will place your right hand in this position (level, with the thumb extended in a square towards the throat), and the thumb to the left of the windpipe. The sign is given by drawing the hand smartly across the throat, and dropping it to the side. This is in allusion to the penalty of the obligation; implying, that, as a man of honour and a mason, you would rather have your throat cut across, than improperly divulge the secrets intrusted to you. That is the sign.

I'll leave it to the reader to draw any relevant similarities between Masonic and Mormon temple wording, but hopefully it isn't overly disrespectful to divulge that the extended thumb is still used by temple-going Mormons every day. The thumb's original symbolic representation as a knife blade is not revealed to today's temple attendees, but historical documents allow the dots to be clearly connected. So what place would a knife have in modern worship? Perhaps the Mormon version hints at ancient sacrificial altars, symbolizing one's devotion to deity, rather than the chilling Masonic description above?

Unfortunately not: In the original Mormon adaptation, the knife represented by the thumb is used to slit the throat from ear to ear, exposing the root of the tongue that is to be torn out of the body. The thumb is the sharp blade that is used to gut the guilty culprit and create an opening through which vital organs are torn out and fed to birds and beasts. It is the knife used to cut the body asunder, allowing the bowels to gush out in a fashion that reeks suspiciously like the fate of Judas, the original anti-Christ. We shudder at the thought of gruesome executions in the style of the Taliban, ISIS, or al Qaeda, but somehow these depictions of blood atonement have been rationalized inside the "House of the Lord."

These morbid penalties are the stated, deserved fate for covenant-breakers like me. If any Mormons feel that my apostasy does not warrant such a grisly punishment, real or metaphorical, please stop extending your thumb in the temple! Given that the instruction to do so is voiced by someone claiming to be speaking for God, the refusal to comply may feel a bit seditious. But given the potential impacts of misguided practice, it may feel liberating, too. God's ways seem to keep adapting to the less punitive societies we have created, after all, so maybe we can help speed things along and remove the last violent undertones that are still being mimicked. Perhaps they remain in current ceremonies for purely figurative purposes, but not everyone has the capacity to see things symbolically, especially those dealing with mental illness.

In the case of the Oregon shooting, Jared was too young to have heard this violent rhetoric in the temple himself; but he was certainly instructed by those who had. Perhaps the messages that he heard were watered down to some degree, but apparently not enough. I commend Jennifer Hoffman for promoting mental health awareness in honor of her son, especially if she believes Jared's mental illness to be the cause of her loss. But this particular mental affliction was fed by ideas of self-righteousness that a "gentile" psychologist would have had trouble undoing. I don't know if Jared was suffering from some sort of narcissism or other diagnosable condition, but his affliction included a need to impose one's beliefs on others at all costs. How do you go about healing that sort of psyche? In my opinion, a prerequisite for that change – well before that tragic day – would need to have to come not just from professional mental health resources but from within the hierarchy of the LDS Church.

"Oh come on," we might say, "it's not the Church's fault; he just misunderstood the message and took it to the extreme!"

But has the message changed to prevent a repeat? If not, what's to prevent the next kid from taking it all wrong again? Has there been any sort of internal investigation with the findings passed along to CES teachers? Perhaps in the immediate wake of the shooting, a message of healing and comfort was most appropriate. But somewhere in the aftermath, the message should likewise include accountability, introspection, justice, restitution, and so on. All I've seen to date are indications that Mormons don't want to wear any bit of the guilt associated with this crime, which leads me to believe that no lessons at all have been learned.

Instead of facing the facts about Jared's motivation, the dialogue in the press and on social media quickly turned toward a discussion of the American school shooting epidemic. The responses made it clear that we were inclined to throw this shooting into the same categories as others before and dismiss it into the past as soon as the next, more fatal shooting occurred. But the Reynolds shooting is unique in its underlying motive. This wasn't a reprisal for bullying or abuse. Perhaps the actions were fueled by mental illness, but there was a primary underlying motivation at work here: This was religious retribution.

The Reynolds shooting wasn't classified as a *mass shooting* according to accepted definitions of the term, but given the firepower contained in Jared's duffel bag that morning, it could easily have entered the record books. The random fluke of a confrontation that put an end to the attempted killing spree makes it possible for me today to completely bury the story and never discuss it again. Hardly a soul outside of Troutdale remembers it anymore, so why should I?

Well, for now I'm stuck with a story of my own violent faith. Only it's not just a story. It's my reality, set in my village; I helped cause this one. And now that I've had a hard look at my own upbringing, I'd like to set out to prevent a repeat. I'll start by sharing Emilio's story right here, right now, "lest we forget."

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["Emilio Hoffman's Death - Sorry Is NOT Good Enough"](#), Jennifer Hoffman's story, Huffington Post, June 8, 2015.

["'Highly spiritual' Oregon high school shooter Jared Padgett wrote plans to kill 'sinners' in diary"](#), NY Daily News June 14, 2014.

Chapter 6. Tell the Truth!

My Analogy: Fahrvergnügen

“VW offers attractive, safe and environmentally sound vehicles that set world standards in their respective class” – Volkswagen 2013 mission statement



This is
based on
a true story

Wolfgang Gaslinger had risen through the ranks at VW; his first job as a mechanic at a Hamburg Volkswagen dealership had paid for his schooling, and he promptly put his marketing degree to use as a car salesman at the same dealership. His thorough knowledge of each car’s engine helped him gain the trust of his loyal customers. He didn’t need to exert any high-pressure sales tactics on them; his confidence in the Volkswagen brand came across naturally, and one way or another, he always managed to turn his customers into die-hard VW fans and repeat customers in the end.

Wolfgang’s words weren’t just a sales pitch; he absolutely loved VWs, and his enthusiasm for the company ran deep. When he was a child, his family had travelled around Europe in a classic Kombi camper van. In high school, his best friend had a Cabrio that had provided some much-needed magnetism at the beach. And after starting a family of his own, the first car he bought his daughter when she got her driver’s license was a retro Beetle. Throughout his life, the VW brand had brought him nothing but pleasant, positive memories.

Fueled by this passion, Wolfgang excelled in his role, and his sales records consistently topped the boards over his peers. His accomplishments eventually landed him a position as a regional sales manager, a job that he naturally embraced. As he continued to climb the executive ladder over the years, he learned more and more about the company structure and how it lined up with the mission statement that he had memorized in his own inductions.

A few years into his corporate career, Wolfgang was asked to move to the company headquarters in Wolfsburg, where his duties included training new sales managers. One of his favorite tasks in that role involved teaching new sales managers the company history. He thoroughly enjoyed his research on the topic, and he put together a set of compelling images and videos for his presentations. He did such a great job with his delivery of historical subject matters that the board of directors ultimately asked him to direct the publication of a book that would commemorate VW’s 80-year anniversary as a company. He dove wholeheartedly into the task and was offered unfettered

access to the company library. He found himself fascinated by the early history of the corporation in particular, much of which was absolutely new to him.

In all his years at VW, for example, nobody had ever mentioned the company's Nazi ties. Wolfgang had once run across a Wikipedia photograph of Adolf Hitler opening the first VW plant, and he had mentioned his surprise to one of his mentors at the time.

"Don't trust what you read about the company online," he was told, "after all, Wikipedia authors don't have any credentials whatsoever."

"But why would they lie about it?" Wolfgang countered.

"Well, the article was probably written by some Ford driver," his mentor explained, "someone who wanted to keep people from driving VWs out of pure jealousy."

The rationale didn't make much sense to him at the time, but he trusted his mentor, made a case for plausibility, and buried his concerns for the time being.

As he dug through the archives in Wolfsburg, however, he realized that everything he had read about the company's history online was true after all. Ferdinand Porsche, the company founder, had in fact developed his design for the people's car – the *Volkswagen* – under the personal direction of Hitler himself.



Adolf Hitler opens the first Volkswagen plant in 1937

As he read more about Ferdinand's achievements and the incestuous history of the early automobile industry, he noted VW's ties to Renault, Daimler-Benz, Mercedes, and even Ford. As it turned out, many of the cars he had been taught to deprecate in his sales work shared the very same origins in hostility.

He knew it might be controversial, but he decided that the inception story was worth telling. He carefully extracted the most palatable pieces of VW's beginnings and included them in the first manuscript that he submitted to the board of directors for their review.

The board held a special meeting to address the draft copy, and Wolfgang was excited to find himself in the presence of so many of his role models. The first review meeting was directed by the Volkswagen Group's CFO, Ferdinand Porsche IV, the great-grandson of the iconic Ferdinand Porsche himself.

“Look, we’ve come a long way as a company,” Ferry the Fourth said as he opened the meeting, “but I’m afraid this book represents a big step backwards.”

Wolfgang’s initial enthusiasm turned to dejection with this opening statement.

“Let me be frank here,” Ferry continued, pointing at the draft manuscript on the table, “the association you’ve highlighted here could result in some unwelcome scrutiny.”

Wolfgang kept his mouth shut, but his head was spinning with possible responses.

“And have you considered our Jewish buyers in particular?” Ferry asked, “Do they really need to have old wounds dug up?”

“If I may,” Wolfgang answered, trying his best not to come across as defensive, “the book focuses on VW’s civilian vehicles before and after the war; I’ve completely ignored their military production lines!”

“Yes, but even so,” Ferry said, “we’re not painting Ferdinand himself in the best light here.”

“Well, I’ve tried to concentrate on his engineering accomplishments,” Wolfgang explained, “and I’ve stayed away from any of his opinions about race or ideology that might offend prospective buyers.”

The comment wasn’t intended as an accusation, but Ferry took it personally. Noting his body language and the discomfort that his comment had stirred around the table, Wolfgang started backpedalling.

“Sorry –“

“Sure, my great-grandfather said some very racist things,” Ferry conceded, “But that doesn’t detract from his accomplishments as an entrepreneur.”

“I completely agree,” said Wolfgang, hoping to find some common ground, “That’s exactly why I left his personal viewpoints out. It doesn’t need to be part of our history anymore, because it’s not who we are today!”

“Well, I’m glad we share that viewpoint on the subject,” Ferry said, “but the book mentions his Nazi party membership and highlights Hitler’s presence at the factory opening.”

“Yes...”

“Do you seriously want to see that in print?” Ferry challenged, “Do people really need to read that our first director was an SS Oberführer who served time as a war criminal?”

“But it’s the truth,” countered Wolfgang.

“Yes, but putting those words in print wouldn’t just shame our own name,” Ferry said, “it would also tarnish Porsche, Audi, Lamborghini, and every other brand in the Volkswagen Group!”

“But anyone with access to Google can find that part of our history online with or without the book,” Wolfgang said, “We can’t hide from the real story.”

“Maybe so, but that doesn’t mean we need to advertise it to the world in our own official publications!”

Sensing the rising blood pressure in the room, the chief tax adviser, Herbert Diess, spoke up for the first time: "Look, do you realize how large a part of Germany's economy is tied up in Volkswagen AG?"

Wolfgang shrugged his shoulders, surprised that the conversation had taken a financial twist.

"20 percent," Diess said, "20 percent!"

Wolfgang raised his eyebrows in apparent surprise, although he already knew the figure himself and had, in fact, included key market share statistics in his manuscript.

"One in seven German jobs depends on us," Diess continued, "People might decide to boycott a vehicle that bears the name of a convicted SS Officer. Have you thought about the consequences of something like that?"

"Hitler also created the Autobahn," Wolfgang replied, "which in turn inspired the U.S. interstate highway system. Should we try to hide that fact too? For fear that people would start boycotting and stay off the freeways from now on?"

"Well, frankly, I don't see the relevance to the issue at hand," Diess said, turning his attention back to Ferry.

"Hitler found lots of support for his antisemitic views in Henry Ford," Wolfgang continued before Ferry could take control of the meeting back for himself, "If people are going to point fingers, they should boycott Fords, not VWs!"

"We're only talking about one company here," Ferry said, "Let's not get distracted by everyone else's faults."

"Well, what I wrote in the book is strictly the facts," Wolfgang said, "It's the plain, simple, true history. Isn't that what you asked me to write?"

"Perhaps you misunderstood our intention in engaging you with this task," Ferry said, "We wanted you to tell a compelling story: The story of our success! Not dig up mud that could be slung back at us!"

"But it's a fascinating history," Wolfgang said, "and it ought to be told without trying to rewrite it."

"You need to remember that we have called this meeting as a courtesy," Ferry said with a hint of condescension, "and we have the final say in the book's content."

"Of course," Wolfgang conceded, realizing he was surrounded by the hands that feed him.

"To close out this point," Ferry said, "I'd just like to say that my grandfather started this company to provide a new kind of car: the *people's car*. Not to build war machines! That conversion was forced on him by the Reich. We want this to be about the story of the "Volk" like you and me. That's the story we want you to tell."

Wolfgang nodded, looking down at Ferry's reflection in the varnish of the oversized boardroom table.

"You can tell that story," Ferry said with an air of authority, "or you can step aside, find yourself a new assignment, and let someone else do the job."

This challenging statement succeeded in getting the attention of everyone around the table, and Ferry dominated the rest of the meeting agenda without any further dissent from Wolfgang.

Although Wolfgang found the outcome of the discussion disappointing, he accepted the authority of the board and talked himself into agreement with their position based on the importance of maintaining positive branding. Over the next few months he dove back into the book project and dutifully reworked the draft, successfully dodging the contentious issues and rewording the text into a euphemistic history that spun the company in the best possible light. The book was finally published in 2010, and it was an overwhelming success: eventually a copy made it onto the waiting room tables of every VW dealership around the world, and every customer purchasing a VW received a complimentary edition for their own coffee tables.

Wolfgang had gained the trust of his superiors with his compliance. Knowing they had a loyal proponent, the board rewarded his dedication with successive rungs up the corporate ladder, culminating with his appointment as the Volkswagen Group's Chief Customer and Marketing Officer, reporting directly to the CFO. Ferry personally announced the new appointment at the 2012 annual meeting, which had the air of a political rally. Wolfgang wholeheartedly supported the messages being presented from the podium, and the applause he heard coming from behind his front-row seat at the meeting helped him justify the concessions he had made to spread that message to others.



Ferry Porsche addressing shareholders at the 2012 Annual Meeting

While he was flattered by the recognition, corporate life as an executive of one of the world's largest publicly traded firms was quite an adjustment. Wolfgang found the lessons learned in compiling the VW history book very handy for his new role, which involved authoring much more crucial company documents. He adopted the selective promotion of positive messages into his writing style, for example, and his willingness to put the company's brand above all else was continually noted in the upper echelons.

Wolfgang enjoyed the new challenge but found himself getting buried under seemingly endless reporting requirements. His position gave him direct responsibility for the publication and distribution of two very essential reports for the global business: The *Strategic Planning Report* and the *Annual Shareholder Report*. The two reports had vastly different purposes:

VW's *Strategic Planning Report* was a confidential, internal document designed to lay out the proposed path forward for the fiscal year, balancing the risks and opportunities in the company's

market, setting short-term and long-term goals, and outlining the investments required to achieve those goals in keeping with the company mission statement. Wolfgang understood that if this report was to be of any value for the board’s decision-making process, it needed to include an honest and transparent assessment of both positive opportunities and negative risks. It could not just be one-sided; if VW received poor reviews from its customers or clients, for example, the feedback should be included in the report, ensuring that the reasons behind the dissatisfaction could be addressed in future planning efforts. Because the strategic planning report might include information that could potentially harm the company image in the eyes of its customers or give away trade secrets to its competitors, VW maintained a policy classifying its contents as proprietary and commercial in confidence; with this in mind, Wolfgang dutifully stressed the document’s confidentiality when distributing the document to authorized recipients.

VW’s *Annual Shareholder Report*, on the other hand, was a much less balanced document, with its publicly accessible contents intended not just for current investors, but as a marketing tool to attract prospective investors. Wolfgang copied some parts of the internal planning report into the shareholder report, but the excerpts were carefully selected to highlight untapped profitability; the final product was packaged much more artistically than the internal documents due to the stark differences in the intended audiences. The contents of the public shareholder report were subject to the discretion of the Board, and some sensitive pieces of information were, of course, deliberately redacted during the editing and review phases.



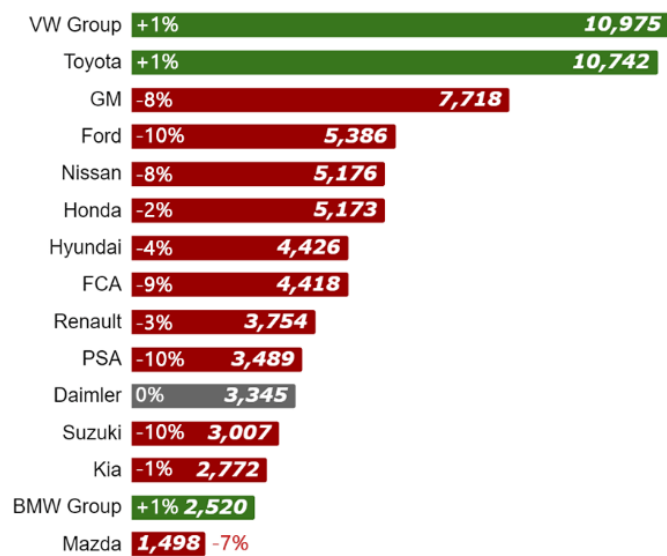
VW’s 2013 Strategic Planning Report (left) and Annual Shareholder Report (right)

Wolfgang was very well versed in adapting his language between the two reports, but he had to keep reminding himself which one he was working on. Knowing he would face the Board’s scrutiny, he had to be very careful with the wording of the public reports; he read many examples published by other companies to prepare himself for the task. As boring as he found the numerical documentation in the typical shareholder reports that he reviewed, he found some of the wording

to be quite amusing. *Losses* in the previous fiscal year were opportunistically repackaged as *investments*; *layoffs* were turned into *efficiency measures* that were purposely and pro-actively implemented in the form of intentional *downsizing* directives or redeployed under *streamlining strategies* or whatever buzzword happened to come along when people finally began to equate downsizing with its real meaning. The reformulation process invoked quite a bit of artistic license and some very creative writing on Wolfgang’s part. He ran across real reports, for example, that changed *downsizing* into hilariously ridiculous terms like “right-sizing”, “smart-sizing”, and other classic euphemisms.

“I mean, boy, who wouldn’t want that, right?” he said sarcastically to one of his colleagues over lunch one day while they were working through the 2014 report, “Our investors could then say, ‘I’m sure glad I’ve invested in a company that’s clever enough to *smart-size!*’”

In the end, Wolfgang realized that the shareholder’s report was essentially a piece of propaganda; everybody knew full well it wasn’t intended to present the whole, hard truth but rather a sugar-coated, subjective version of it. The numbers themselves couldn’t lie – or at least they shouldn’t if Wolfgang wanted to avoid indictment – but it was all packaged up in the best possible light to convince existing customers to hold onto their shares of stock, and to convince potential new customers to buy their own shares. Wolfgang didn’t feel like he had anything to hide; after all, the VW group’s total sales topped every other carmaker on the planet, so his charts didn’t require any manipulation at all to paint a positive picture:



Global annual car sales in 1,000 units

Wolfgang knew that there was value in the appearance, and the appearance created value, which gave the company the needed funds to actually meet their own projections in the precarious cycle that makes the capitalistic world go around.

Telling your shareholders how well a company *will* do is sometimes a self-fulfilling prophecy as additional demand – and shareholder confidence in the projections – helps drive up the share price. Sure, this pressure has led some companies to state exaggerated earnings that put them in a tedious position, but if people think a company is valuable, it will be valuable, since the momentary value lies precisely in the demand that results from the impression of having value. Investing badly needed funds into branding can be a big gamble, but the more people believe in your company, the greater the demand...and up goes the price. Obviously it’s not quite that simple, and – obviously – if

you look at Dutch tulips, dot coms, and bitcoin, the charade can only be kept up for so long if there isn't much substance behind it. But VW? Fahrvergnügen? Das Auto? Those catch phrases were backed by real factories fed by real stainless steel smelted from the real iron ore that keeps the global economy cooking year after year.

Wolfgang used these arguments to justify the selective process of omitting troubling aspects of the business from the public shareholder report and interspersing risks and concerns with an equal dose of bullish positivity in the much more candid, internal strategic planning report. Wolfgang had absolute confidence in the projections that went into both reports year after year – that is, until one day in 2015 when he held a phone interview with Bernhardt Faust, one of VW's top systems engineers, to discuss risks to the business that might make their way into the strategic planning report.

"Anything else?" Wolfgang asked after running through the standard questions.

"Actually, there is one more thing that you might want to be aware of," Bernhardt said, "only we can't discuss it over the phone."

The hesitation seemed a bit odd to Wolfgang, but he agreed to meet Bernhardt over lunch the next day. With his publication deadline looming, he wanted to get straight to the point.

"So, what do you have for me?" asked Wolfgang before they had even ordered their lunches.

"Government regulators have been snooping around the lab lately," Bernhardt said, "Apparently there have been some accusations raised that the emissions systems on some of VW's cars have been deliberately hacked to fool the testing equipment."

"That's ridiculous," said Wolfgang, "Who do you think made that up? Who's out to get us? Mercedes? Ford?"

"Well, it looks like there might actually be something to it," Bernhardt said.

"No way," said Wolfgang, "Not under Ferry's watch!"

"Have a look at this document," Bernhardt said, pulling a folder out of his briefcase, "They're going to dig through our records with a subpoena, and this is just one of the reports they're going to find."

"OK, I'll give it a read. But why are you telling me this?" asked Wolfgang, "Shouldn't you just take it up with your own supervisor?"

"I did," said Bernhardt, "and he said not to worry about it. His reaction convinced me that he already knew about it."

"Do you think this goes all the way to the top?" asked Wolfgang.

"I have no idea," said Bernhardt, "but if it blows up, I thought you would at least want to be aware that it could have drastic consequences for the business."

They shook hands, and Wolfgang took the document home to read. The shareholder report was about to be released, but he still had a few days to work on the internal planning report. Back at work the next day, he dug further into the documentation and found some internal memos that

highlighted the issue. He began documenting the risks to the business in his draft report and called a special meeting with Ferry – making sure the rest of the Board would not be present.

Look, I know the report is due soon,” Wolfgang said when he met Ferry in his private office, “but I wanted to get your advice on whether we should include a very substantial risk in this year’s planning report.”

“What have you got?” asked Ferry, drumming his fingers on his desk pad.

“I think we’re going to have to set aside a large sum of capital for legal battles and get the PR department ready to go into damage control mode – maybe start wording press releases that acknowledge some very serious mistakes.”

“And why’s that?” asked Ferry.

Wolfgang went on to explain the allegations involving the intentional ploy to fool emissions testing equipment. There was no proof yet, but he explained that if the charges were substantiated, it could destroy the company’s reputation. He finished his explanation with a recommendation to at least include the risks in the fiscal year’s planning report.

“Even though it’s a confidential document,” Ferry said, “information this volatile would surely get leaked to the press.”

“So maybe we should do a pre-emptive press release,” suggested Wolfgang, “Without that, we’d be putting each of the report’s recipients – like the regional sales managers – in the position of having to lie about what they know.”

“I think we should leave it out of the report,” Ferry said.

“Why’s that?” asked Wolfgang.

“Because they’ll never be able to prove it,” Ferry said.

“Are you sure?” asked Wolfgang.

“Yes, because even if it were true,” Ferry replied confidently, “you’d have to set up mobile equipment that could essentially take what goes on in the testing centers and replicate it around a moving vehicle on the road.”

Wolfgang suddenly got the distinct impression that Ferry had already thought this one through.

“It’s impossible,” Ferry continued, “It would cost a fortune to set up. I mean, who would ever go to that much effort?”

Wolfgang shrugged his shoulders.

And even if they came up with some supporting data, I’m sure our own scientists could call the results into question,” Ferry said, “You realize we’ve got people on staff who wrote the standards; I’m sure they can come up with a way to get us out of this.”

“But a lot of people buy VWs precisely because of our claims about cleaner cars!” Wolfgang said, “Are you saying that even if the allegations are true, we should keep our mouths shut?”

“Listen,” Ferry said, getting a bit defensive, “diesel vehicles only make up a small fraction of overall car sales.”

Wolfgang hadn't mentioned that the alleged scandal involved diesel cars. With this slip, Ferry revealed his prior knowledge of the issue. Wolfgang's head was spinning with the implications, but he let Ferry continue with his argument.

"Our other vehicles do run clean – much cleaner, in fact, than those of our competitors."

Wolfgang wasn't sure where Ferry was going with this.

"If we stopped making cars altogether, our customers would turn to other brands, brands that you know full well pollute more than our cars."

"Perhaps," said Wolfgang.

"So you see, on the whole, blowing the lid on this issue – and taking out our market share in the process – would actually increase harmful emissions into the atmosphere."

Wolfgang was thoroughly confused by the argument.

"If you care so much about the environment," Ferry said, "think about that; are you willing to take that risk?"

"But it's wrong!" Wolfgang countered, no longer treating it as an open case, "The testing results are fabrications – made up numbers!"

"We're working to fix the discrepancies with future models. We have the best engineers in the world working on it," Ferry said, "We'll get there."

Wolfgang really wanted to believe that claim, but it seemed like quite a stretch given the order-of-magnitude discrepancies in the testing results.

"Are you willing to put one in seven German jobs at stake for your temporary little hero moment in the meantime?" Ferry asked.

Wolfgang sat back, contemplating his options. He really had no intention of being a whistle blower. "Fine," he said, throwing his hands up after a minute of silence, "You're the boss; I just thought you should know that there's a looming risk to the business that could explode at any moment."

"Listen, you've been working way too hard, and I think you need a break," Ferry said, "Just get the shareholder report out, and give us what you've got so far for the planning report. We'll take care of the rest."

"But.."

"We'll handle it!" Ferry said.

Wolfgang nodded, shook Ferry's hand, and walked out the door. He went back to his desk and started drafting up an e-mail to Ferry to accompany the draft planning report with the research he had done on the emissions testing. Honestly, he wasn't sure it would ever see the light of day.

The knot in his stomach since leaving Ferry's office was growing tighter. Burying the information just didn't feel right. His mind drew a blank as he tried to word the accompanying text, so he turned to the only other task left on the day's to-do list: to post the carefully reviewed and sanitized shareholder report online, which, of course, contained no mention of the brewing Dieselgate scandal.

As he navigated his way to the upload portal for the public website, he had to enter his password three different times to get through the secure server's firewall. He finally got to the editing screen of the public page where the highly anticipated shareholder report already had a placeholder for the public release, timed to coincide with the market's closing bell for the weekend. He browsed through the folder where the final copy of the shareholder report was saved right next to his draft strategic planning report.

He hovered his mouse over the shareholder report and felt his head spinning. In a surreal daydream, he imagined the catastrophic consequences of selecting the wrong document. But he also imagined how free he would feel blowing the cover on the scandal. If he buried it now, he would have to bury it forever due to his own complicit association with the cover-up. But if he went public with it, maybe he would be completely liberated. Sure, the company would implode, but maybe there was something to the old cliché that the truth would set him free...of his own job, that is.

Just to see how it would feel, he clicked on the wrong document...or perhaps the wrong document was the right document to select. Now one click could have been a mistake, but he knew the system would give him one last chance to change his mind. He eyed the two buttons on his screen: Publish or Cancel.

His next move couldn't be a mistake. He looked at the button, knowing that a single millimeter of motion – a twitch of his index finger – would change his life forever. He had to take an extrasensory view of himself in the moment, looking at his arm like an appendage that wasn't even his own.



"Oops," he said out loud, when he watched his finger left-click on his mouse, sending the confidential document into the ether with an invisible, ever-growing chain reaction of electrons that he could almost see in his mind.

He knew it wouldn't be long before the scandal was public knowledge. He quickly changed the wording of his e-mail to Ferry into a succinct resignation letter and attached the shareholder report.

"Perhaps you'll like this sanitized report better," Wolfgang wrote, "The messy bits we discussed have all been removed."

With that, Wolfgang quit before they could fire him, taking his personal boxes with him before Ferry could even mobilize security to accompany him on his way out.

He went home for the weekend, turned off his phone, and avoided any media whatsoever, living in blissful ignorance for the time being. On Monday morning, he finally decided to tune in to see the fallout. VW claimed the upload was an accidental error and quickly substituted the correct version of the report on their website. But by that time there had already been enough downloads to shock the market. In the 2 hours after the opening bell on Monday, September 21, 2015, VW lost

a record \$20 billion in value. It was the biggest one-day drop that any company anywhere on the planet had experienced in many years.

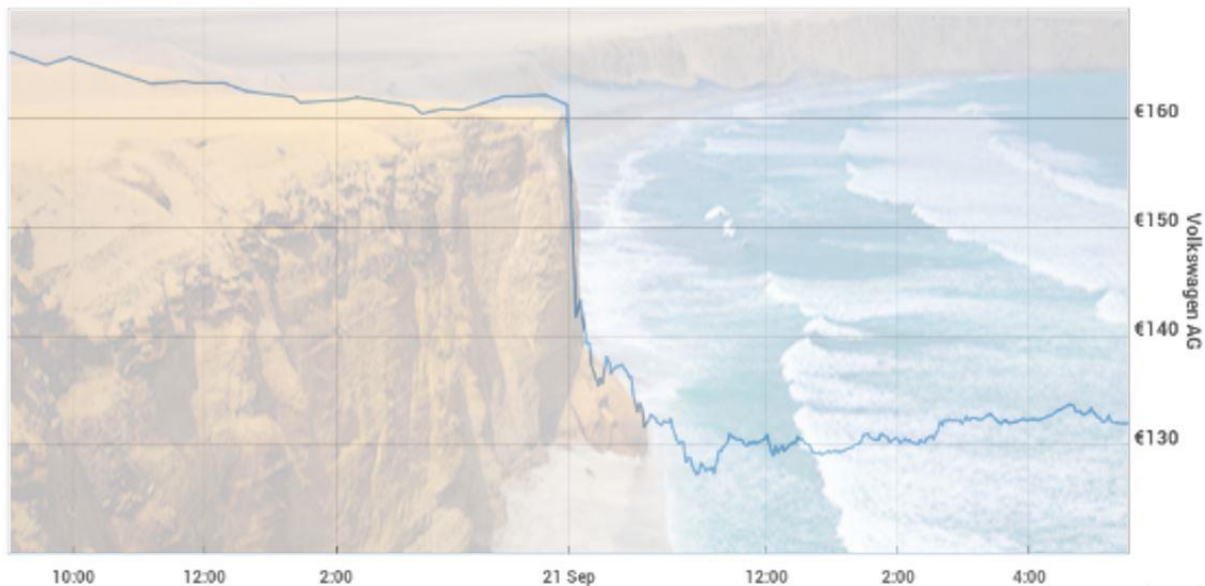
Volkswagen AG VZO O.N. ▼ 129.05 -33.350 (-20.54%) XETRA: VOW3 - Sep 21 5:35 PM CET



People talk about something dropping off a cliff in a figurative sense, but to Wolfgang, this particular cliff-dive felt awfully literal. On his wall hung a calendar that included a shot of one of the ocean roads that had been used in “Fahrvergnügen” commercials years before.



As he looked at the calendar photo, Wolfgang thought it was uncanny how much the actual stock chart resembled a real cliff. Just for fun, he printed out the stock chart and held it up against his calendar. He had to laugh when he saw the near-perfect fit and what it represented: He had singlehandedly sent his own company crashing over a cliff.



In the end, the short-term consequences weren't good for anyone, but Wolfgang hoped the long-term lessons learned would make it all worth it. Many of his friends and former colleagues took a huge financial hit, and some blamed him directly for his sedition rather than place the blame on those who had perpetuated the scandal.

It was an excruciatingly painful fiasco for VW, particularly for those in the chain of command who had spent years suppressing the truth. Is it any wonder why people sometimes fear exposing the truth? To this day, the effect has never really subsided. Even years after the scandal, the reputational damage and the toll on diesel sales seem to be permanent fixtures of today's economy. One thing is certain from public opinion surveys, customer reviews, and market trends: Dieselgate changed the automotive landscape forever.

Wolfgang never set foot in a VW factory or office again after leaking the internal document. Nowadays he still enjoys driving his own Jetta, but to him VWs have become just another car. *Das Auto? The car?* He used to believe that exclusive claim. But these days as he drives along the freeway and sees other VWs on the road, he realizes that although he has some sort of shared memory, history, or culture with other VW drivers, in Wolfgang's mind, the VW has taken its proper place as "a" car. Special, perhaps. But better? Car ownership has become simply a matter of preference, and every other make and model on the street seems like an absolutely legitimate, valid choice for each unique, individual driver. To an outsider, that seems like an obvious statement, but to Wolfgang, the late-in-life arrival at that eye-opening realization does feel truly liberating.

In the end, he couldn't actually say whether he was glad he blew the whistle – whether the trade-off between the economy and the environment that he gambled on even made sense. But it didn't matter. Once he knew the truth, his complicity in the coverup would not just have put him in the miserable position as the carrier of the secret; he would have been left facing indictments and pointing his fingers at his co-workers trying to deflect the blame. The truth was going to come out one way or another. And this particular piece of truth did end up setting Wolfgang free.

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So that brings us to the end of Wolfgang’s story. Now this story may sound far-fetched, but as I stated at the beginning:

This is  
based on  
a true story

The problem with this particular “true story” is that if you Google the name “Wolfgang Gaslinger,” you’ll see that he doesn’t actually exist. He wasn’t even a fictional character until today, when I simply made up his name by pulling it out of the air. So how can I claim a true story here? Well, I never claimed it was completely true; I only claimed that it was based on true events. Like I said, it is “based on” a true story. Didn’t see that? Well, that’s not my fault, you should have looked more closely. It was right there, between the lines. OK, so I mixed up font sizes just a bit, but if you actually zoom in on the fine print, you’ll see that there are obviously three lines of text, so I was actually telling the truth in the end:

This is  
based on  
a true story

Don’t go blaming me for your negligence in skipping over that line. It’s completely obvious that there’s some text there, so why didn’t you zoom in on it and figure it out yourself? If you had done your homework, you would have seen that these were my actual words:

This is  
based on  
a true story

Sure, you can technically make that claim with pretty much any fictional story ever written; there’s bound to be at least some truth somewhere in the setting. Superhero movies that are set in World War I, World War II, or the Cold War are all based on those true events, after all, so couldn’t we make the same claim about the Avengers being a true story at heart? If so, do I have the additional right to shrink those two extra words into fine print in an effort to sway the readers into believing that Wolfgang actually exists?

[Is it ok that billboards have fine print that can’t possibly be read at highway speeds? Generally those absurd additions to billboards are in purported compliance with some sort of law or regulation. Technically the advertisers have included the text in keeping with the “letter of the law” ...never mind that you’d have to actually climb up the billboard’s ladder to read it for yourself. It’s all right there for your information!]

Whatever the answer, Wolfgang’s story is entirely allegorical, despite the presence of the true events and share prices that it is based on. Dieselgate was certainly real. But Wolfgang’s story is an alternate reality, a “choose your own ending” story in which a potential whistleblower decided to actually blow the whistle. Now for six years, the real, internal VW employees who became aware of the real, internal problem – employees like Wolfgang – did nothing to address the scandal. So technically Wolfgang himself might be based on any number of true characters, any one of whom could have taken the risk that Wolfgang took and told the truth. I am simply carrying an alternate choice to its conclusion.

In the end, there was no internal admission until the charges were laid. The cliff in the stock price is now etched into history; I didn’t have to make that up, but I am convinced that the fallout

effect of an internal disclosure would have been far less drastic than being caught red-handed by regulators after years of denial, cover-ups, and outright lies.

So why would I bring up a publicly-traded, for-profit company here? Why bore even myself in writing out endless descriptions of company documents? Why talk about business at all when this essay is supposed to be about religion?

Seriously?

Well, the church – *THE* Church, capitalized like *DAS* Auto – is technically a corporation. Now I don't want to go around making accusations about the LDS Church being run for profit...at least not *solely* for profit. But tithing funds are held largely as investments, subject to the whims of the market; and when the stock market does well, God's Kingdom on earth reaps the benefits. When the markets crumble, so do God's assets. Protecting those assets is arguably one of the essential stewardships of church leaders, so it is understandable that the Church has some full-time employees whose primary job description is to make the whole enterprise sustainably profitable and recession-proof; but I would imagine those who spend their time in the clergy, even those at the higher echelons who are technically paid for their service, would probably have fared better in terms of personal profit if they had turned down their church positions and focused on their own careers.

Now everyone is driven by their own motives, which makes it impossible to generalize any presumptions of that nature, but I really don't think the LDS apostles are in it for their own monetary gain. After all, they never ran for the office in the first place, even if some have tried very hard to be in a position that would allow God to choose them for the next rung in the ladder. In Mormon circles, vocalizing that you want a particular calling is one sure way to avoid that position. And vocalizing your surprise, humility, and the fact that you weren't seeking the appointment is almost compulsory for the public acceptance of any high office in the church. You might argue that one's church status in an LDS community can help bolster one's own business, but if you are driven by the love of money, climbing the Mormon ladder would be one of the dumbest things you could do, because for the lay clergy to sufficiently rise to the ranks where you are finally reimbursed for even a fraction of your expended time and resources, you'd have to climb through many, many years in the red with no guaranteed bailout in the end.

So if it's not cash flow, what propels the vessel? Believers credit divine direction and spiritual confirmation rather than mammon as the basis for decisions that guide the organization; but if following God's promptings just happens to result in financial profitability, well then that's just part of the rainy-day plan rather than the end goal itself.

On an individual basis, Mormons across all ranks are driven by a personal gain of another sort: their own salvation, which is, in turn, contingent on their efforts – if not the results – in helping God to fulfil his own mission for humanity. That mission is tied into the salvation of the masses...which is directly proportional to the value of the organization itself. When the Church suffers reputational damage and faces a corresponding loss of trust, fewer souls come to Christ, and God's goals for his children are thwarted. Anything that harms the organization's name – essentially the company brand – defies God's own "work and glory" which by some LDS scriptural interpretations is tied up in the number of souls who can be granted immortality and eternal life through portals that can only be unlocked with keys held by *THE* Church. It is thus no surprise that the name of the church is protected at all costs. How else can we explain the immediate suppression of anything that might harm the reputation or image of the church, even when the allegations are absolutely true?

If a Church member allows the reputation of the Church to be tarnished, the fallout becomes their burden to bear. When the publication of a culturally insensitive photo-op got the Church kicked out of Thailand back in the 1980s, for example, the responsible missionaries wore the life-long guilt for countless lost souls who never had the chance to receive the message. Knowing what was at stake, would a Mormon newspaper editor have allowed those photographs to be published? Or would they have been buried in the same manner as the Salamander Letter, the Kinderhook Plates, and post-Manifesto plural marriage records? If I had run across the photographs of missionaries desecrating the sacred icons of their host country at the time, I honestly would have been very tempted to burn them to avoid the public relations disaster that would accompany their distribution. No harm, no foul!

So what does any of this have to do with Dieselgate? Wolfgang – representing a number of true counterparts – found that some company executives had known about the scandal for years but wanted to keep it quiet for fear of the ensuing embarrassment and financial doom. Although the brewing risk was known in the upper tiers, VW’s own salespeople had been offered no advance warning whatsoever. Showroom employees kept right on doing their jobs around the world, legitimately believing they were selling clean cars, and continuing to claim their conviction of the stated emissions values, unwittingly duping their customers out of their car payments right up until the day the share price crashed.

Can you blame a dealer or a entry-level sales rep for not looking into the claims more deeply – not even simply Googling just to confirm that the claims are valid? In VW’s case, the salespeople seem inculpable enough...or am I just trying to justify my two full-time years and many part-time years as a salesman hawking a different product I can no longer stand behind?

If you were selling VWs in 2014, didn’t you have a right to know the real story rather than hearing about it at the same time as the customers you unwittingly duped? And if a lowly VW salesperson did somehow manage to get wind of the issue prior to the public disclosure, would they have been obliged to inform their customers? Knowing that the leaked information would instantly cut the resale value of the vehicle in half – and potentially bankrupt the company to boot – could they justify keeping quiet?

“It’s still a great car,” you might argue, “a few points on a chemical analysis doesn’t compromise the value of the entire vehicle!”

Well, it’s one thing for a salesperson to dupe a customer into buying a sham product; it’s quite another matter when the factory itself has duped its own salespeople into believing the false claims they are propagating and encourages them to keep right on trucking in the face of the misleading information. What made it worse for VW was the news that even long after the deception was discovered internally, they “doggedly denied any wrongdoing” as the Associated Press reported. For years, company officials had, in fact, acknowledged some limited discrepancies but blamed them on technical errors rather than deliberate attempts to deceive regulators.

Do I even need to connect the “technicality” dots to LDS apologetics here, or is the connection obvious?

In VW’s case, the stated goal of helping the environment was secondary at best. The market share in terms of vehicle sales always seems to have been the primary goal – as you might expect from any major automobile manufacturer. If cars that actually minimize environmental damage could generate sales, that would be a bonus. But if cars that help the environment don’t sell, well then the environment becomes absolutely secondary to the primary goal of selling cars – whatever it

takes! With that perspective, VW's officers kept the deception going, letting their own salespeople buy into the lies.

These lies were propagated not just to retain vested investors but to continue courting prospective investors. In the end, of course, it wasn't just the scandal but also the news of the cover-up itself that scared off new investors. The reputational damage and loss of trust in the brand ensured an ongoing reduction in the company's value rather than just a one-time shock. The company spent years in damage control mode and ended up having to completely reword its mission statement to avoid the air of hypocrisy.

Although I'm perhaps not quite as passionate about Volkswagens as Wolfgang, I have had an affinity for the brand since childhood. The dream car I have coveted for decades sits under the VW Group's ownership, and a lot of my best childhood and high school memories are tied up with a range of Volkswagens.



*Making memories in the classic Kombi campervan, my dream car, and a high school fun-wagen*

Fueled by these memories, I have to admit that when I first read about the alleged scandal, my first reaction was denial. I had enough faith in the organization that I assumed they couldn't possibly have just made up the test results. It didn't take long, though, for my "No way would they do that!" reaction to change to "Holy cow, they made it up!"

In similar fashion, when I first heard rumors about the implementation of the November policy, I said, "They wouldn't do that!" My reaction was propped up by lifelong memories and by a trust that those at the helm would do the right thing. After the truth was confirmed, I took the broken trust further, eventually coming to the realization that Moroni was a figment of Joseph Smith's imagination; the impacts of that revelation on my daily life were much more substantial than Dieselgate. My reaction was similar to how I felt about the VW case, but perhaps magnified a few-fold: "Holy shit, he made it up!"

In the end, the verdict for the VW scandal pointed the blame on a hyper-pressurized culture of growth and promises of sustained sales increases that were, frankly, unsustainable. Is that same

culture present within the LDS Church? Is there pressure to inflate numbers? Do the documents tend to sugar-coat things? Are the test results manipulated? Well, if I'm relying on my own experience, I'd have to say yes, absolutely!

Just like the selective signals emitted by the cars in this story, as Mormons, we tend to cheat precisely when we're being tested – which means it's not a fair test at all. I used to do this to my wife: She would ask a question about some discrepancy in the doctrine or history of the church, and I'd realize my convictions were being put to the test. I'd spew out some canned answer like I did when investigators asked tough questions. In milk-before-meat fashion, I would present the external shareholder report version of the story while keeping the internal strategic report to myself, knowing full well that an ongoing cover-up was part of the standard operating procedures.

Under that system, the regulators and investigators never see the actual street result. Internally, we hide the suicides, the depression, and the anxiety in favor of promoting the external propaganda of forever families. Anything that undermines that message tends to get suppressed: Men are that they might have joy, right? Well, the gospel brings joy; and the gospel is perfect. So if you're not feeling the joy, and you're feeling less than perfect, there must be something wrong with you. You turn that frown upside down and get with the program! Let's see those positive emissions results! Well, that whole concept is summed up in a few revealing lines of an LDS primary song:

*If you chance to meet a frown,  
Do not let it stay.  
Quickly turn it upside down  
And smile that frown away.*

*No one likes a frowning face.  
Change it for a smile.  
Make the world a better place  
By smiling all the while.*

While we're drawing comparisons between the Volkswagen Group and the Corporation of the First Presidency, how about this little substitution:

*If your diesel's spewing fumes,  
Do not let them know,  
Simply change your testing mode,  
So they will let you go.*

*Want to pass emissions tests,  
to hit the road today?  
Just turn on the override  
and problems go away!*

Relating it back to Mormonism, my Aunt Kristie, who is a master of musical parodies, coined preferred lyrics for this particular song:

*If you chance to meet a frown,  
do not turn away.  
It probably just means that person  
needs some love today.*



*Being happy's lots of fun  
and smiling feels just fine.  
But no one can be smiling  
and feel happy all the time.*

*Mad and sad and frightened  
are feelings that are real  
and frowning is one way  
we have of showing how we feel.*

*We all need friends who understand  
the feelings that we share.  
Make the world a better place  
by showing that you care.*

No car spews out clean exhaust all the time. We're each a mixed bag. And we're all full of [crap] sometimes.

In Mormonism, we refer to superlatives that can't possibly exist. Like Trump's "perfect" phone calls, claiming that a set of printed words constitutes the "most correct" book on earth doesn't make the least bit of sense. Likewise, an organization can be neither true nor untrue. It always made me cringe a bit to hear those statements from the inside, but it sounds absolutely absurd from the outside. There is no such thing as a "true" prophet just as there is no such thing as a true politician, musician, mathematician, or pediatrician. Everyone has virtues and vices, faults and flaws. There is no such thing as a "true" church, just as there is no such thing as a true company, nation, fraternity, or any other compilation of individuals that is incorporated into an institution.

Despite dichotomous claims that LDS Church leaders cannot lead their followers astray, the admitted history has shown otherwise. Leaders at the helm have committed acts of deception that are at least on par with Dieselgate. One thing that helped VW begin to recover from the dregs of their scandal was confronting the issues head on, which is where the similarities to the LDS Church end. In moving past the scandal, VW put out ads acknowledging the mistakes, apologizing for them, and making internal changes to prevent the repetition of similar crimes in the future. The admissions weren't hidden in unlinked essays on the VW website; they were blasted out to the public at half-time during the NBA finals!

In contrast, when the LDS Church has been caught in cover-ups, we get a barrage of justifications, rationalizations, and non-apologetic apologetics. Any hint of wrongdoing is basked in contradictory language explaining why it was the right thing to do at the time even if people think it's wrong today. I have rarely seen any allusion to endemic, internal, organizational problems. Blame for mistakes is placed either on rogue individuals acting without authority, or on a higher authority altogether. Don't blame church leaders for polygamy, racial exclusion, or whatever else comes along next. We're just following God's mysterious ways!

What if the Volkswagen Group revealed that they were actually operated by some larger conglomeration whose director came up with the Dieselgate scheme as some sort of trial to put the rest of the company on the right path – all as part of a larger strategic plan that exonerates Ferry and his cohorts? Would you buy it? That's pretty much what happened in the 1930s to Ferry the First. And nobody can blame the company for that little indiscretion, knowing that Hitler faced down Ferry with a flaming sword. He had no choice in the matter, after all, right? Those needing a defense might find some absurdly convenient deflections, but it sure doesn't fix any of the real problems!



The marketing director behind VW’s apologetic ads was asked why he was still digging up the dirt years rather after the scandal rather than burying it. He explained:

“Without mentioning the past...we would never have the credibility or authenticity to move forward.”

Exactly.

Dieselgate involved one particular piece of technology that was misrepresented by industry for economic purposes, but it is by no means an isolated incident. History has shown that the truth about seatbelts, lead, CFCs, second-hand smoke, climate change, Teflon production, and any number of other other subjects has likewise been suppressed by stakeholders covering a range of respective products. Those with vested interests and much to lose will go to great lengths to retain their market share. Can we add polygamy, the priesthood ban, and the November policy to that list? The stated claims of divine direction obviously cannot be substantiated, but the salesmen accept the official proclamations, even though some of the facts around the matter have been falsified and exaggerated. Let’s do away with the cover-ups. Say it like it is. Admit the mistakes. Own it!

If we can bring this to a close now, here is an open-ended sequel to Wolfgang’s story: He was eventually exonerated as a whistle blower, and in the wake of Ferry’s resignation along with other key board members, his name was no longer spoken for ill. In fact, five years after Wolfgang’s book was published, a new printing was ordered, and Wolfgang was asked if he would be willing to update the book with a new preface. Once again, Wolfgang wanted to tell the whole story, which this time around included an apology for the scandal. He met with Bernhardt Faust, who had been appointed to the board of directors in the meantime, to discuss the contents.

“That’s old news now,” Bernhardt said, “We’ve admitted it, fixed it, and moved on. Can’t we focus the updates on our new mission statement?”

Wolfgang read the new wording aloud: “We serve our customers’ diverse needs with a portfolio of strong brands. We assume responsibility regarding the environment, safety, and social issues. We act with integrity and build on reliability, quality, and passion as the foundation of our work.”

“Is this chapter about Dieselgate *useful* in fulfilling the mission statement?” Bernhardt asked.

“No, it shows exactly the opposite of what we’re trying to achieve today,” Wolfgang answered.

“So let it go!” Bernhardt said.

Wolfgang headed home that night wondering whether to take the job or walk away from it.

Like Wolfgang, I’ve been asked to present a selective history of an organization. When I expressed my concerns about that approach, I was told to doubt my doubts and keep quiet. I’ve largely complied with that request over the years, venting quietly about my concerns here on my personal computer in an attempt to salvage my own mental health without actually leaking the truth. Until today, these thoughts have only been shared in private. But I do have a WordPress account where I can add online content with the single click of a button. It’s all right here in an encrypted file. Would uploading it change my life? Do I let that index finger twitch? Or do I hit the escape key?



What would Wolfgang do? Well, if you are reading this, then you know full well what I decided to do when facing this dilemma. I am Wolfgang, after all!

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My Reality: Yin and Yang

“Some things that are true are not very useful.” – Boyd K. Packer

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Now here’s the part where I get a bit philosophical, though I’m admittedly just winging it with this discussion. Public speakers and writers are encouraged to state their authority right from the start in order to gain their audience’s confidence; well in my case, I’ll have to either ignore that advice or shut up, since I’ve never had a single philosophy course, and I’ve never even read a single philosophy book. Since I can’t cough up a single qualification that entitles me to speak on the topic of philosophy, feel free to ignore everything that follows here while I take some time to catch up and use these ramblings to sort out my own philosophy of life.

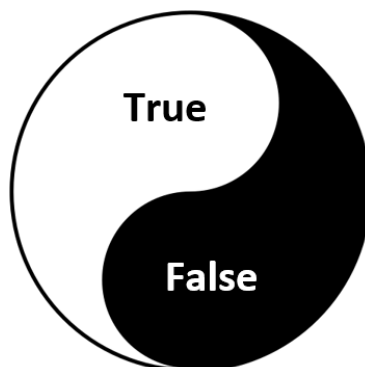
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The concept of Yin and Yang has a Mormonspeak counterpart in the phrase *opposition in all things*.

A simplified taijitu for yin and yang represents the duality of good and bad, black and white, positive and negative, warm and cold, and other interconnected opposites:



Sometimes it’s simplest to think of the world in these sorts of absolutes. Let’s start with the idea of fact and fiction, for example, and simplify it into true versus false. I’ll call the black “*yin*” portion of the symbol *false* and the white “*yang*” portion *true*. The choice of shades is absolutely arbitrary, which shouldn’t need to be said, but perhaps warrants a mention given the very real and disturbingly literal associative references to skin color that have unfortunately pervaded in Mormon doctrine and literature. That said, here’s the symbol with binary labels that might give us a false sense of security, as if our daily data intake could ever be neatly classified as one or the other:



Mormons are prone to repeat the phrase, “The Church is True,” for example, as if an organization could be categorized in that manner and assigned a single label. If I’m stuck with just

two options, an organization would become "untrue" the instant I accept any official information as false; in reality, the dichotomy of true and false demands a deeper dive.

In conceptualizing the notion of truth and its polar opposite – since this is a philosophical discussion – I feel obliged to quote at least one philosopher. How about Immanuel Kant, a German philosopher who did his philosophizing during the Age of Enlightenment? Now as a further disclaimer, the last time I heard Kant's name mentioned was in a college German class many decades ago. Overloaded with technical assignments, I saw philosophical discussions as rhetorical time devourers prone to spinning in infinite loops without resolution. As an engineering student, I was wired to identify a problem and work out its solution; the instant one of my liberal arts professors would invoke Kant's name during a humanities lecture, my brain involuntarily went into an emergency shutdown mode. So I'm not entirely comfortable quoting Kant, but I'll give it a try here with a translation from his *Lectures on Logic*:

"Many things can be true and yet still harmful to man. Not all truth is useful."

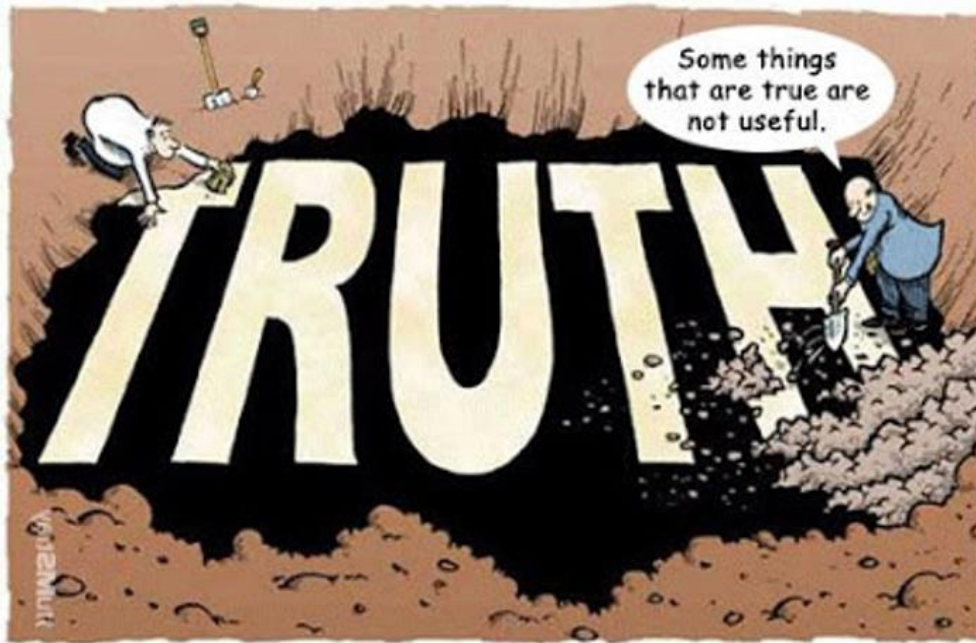
What he doesn't say, at least not quite as concisely, is what to do with the "useless" truth. Based on the lengthy dissertations that follow this tweetable snippet, the implication is that the harmful portions of the truth should be omitted, ignored, discarded, or selectively suppressed.

We might altruistically claim that all truth should be told, but I think everyone would have to agree that there are times and situations in which Kant's statement is...well, *true*. On the battlefield, for example, your own side's troop movements may be true, but disclosing them publicly for your enemy's perusal would not be very useful. In another setting, some intimate details between a couple may be true, but posting them on social media for the world to see may not be very useful for your relationship. We all use discretion in our daily dealings (though it seems some might benefit from a higher dose of it!)

To break this down further, we'll need to set some bounds on the concepts of truth and usefulness. Some see truth as an absolute, while others view it more arbitrarily; more on that below. The term *useful*, on the other hand, cannot stand on its own as it is obviously subjective, by necessity having an implied association with an ultimate goal. Anything that might be useful for one purpose may at the same time be useless for another purpose, after all. So you can't call something useful without the assumed or stated context of its purpose. A *useful* piece of information would be considered *beneficial* to that given cause. Kant calls out its opposite as "harmful," which likewise implies that there is a given cause being harmed. Something that is labeled harmful would be detrimental to that goal.

Let's take the mission of the LDS Church as one example of an ultimate goal. In addressing Church educators in 1981, Boyd K. Packer substituted his own paraphrase of Kant's statement:

"Some things that are true are not very useful."



Elder Packer replaces Kant’s “harmful” with the more benign “not very useful,” which could essentially be rephrased as useless, irrelevant, non-applicable, or another neutral term. Useful could be the opposite of any of these terms, but if we’re going to say that *useful* is something positive, its opposite wouldn’t just be neutral, i.e. not useful; the opposite would be something negative – something harmful as Kant stated. If we start with Elder Packer’s quote and insert that substitution with an underlying condition of a purpose and an assumed action, we’re left with:

- “Some things that are true are ~~not very useful~~ [harmful to our cause...and should be omitted.]”

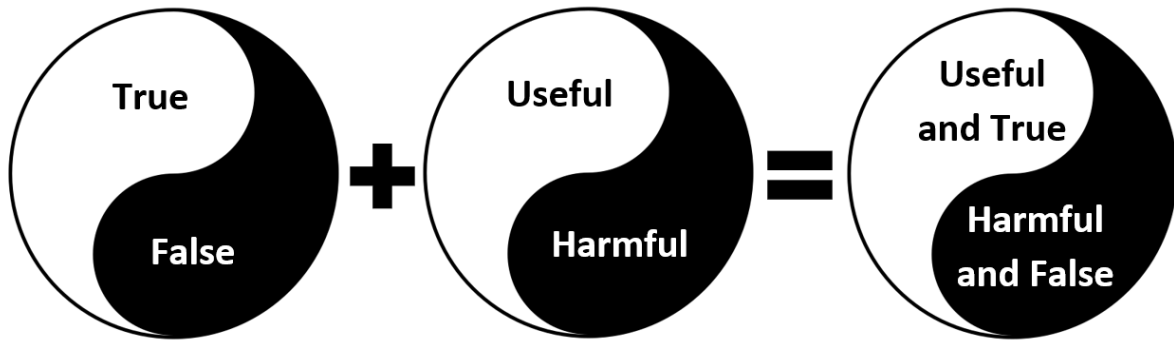
We could flip this one around to test the inverse conclusion:

- “Some things that are not true are very beneficial to our cause...and should be promoted.”

Now the first statement may seem palatable in some circumstances, but implementing the second statement may at first glance seem counter to our own moral fiber. By definition, things that aren’t true are lies. Can we allow ourselves to condone outright lies? Before we dismiss the inverse argument as a breach of one of the ten commandments, let’s check its validity in a few applications. In family life, from a knee-jerk denial of attraction to someone outside a marriage, to a made-up story that serves as a smoke screen for a surprise birthday party, to Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, and the Tooth Fairy, there are plenty of everyday rationalizations for a whole range of untruths. Even life-and-death untruths may be warranted if we put ourselves in a wartime context. Not only can we justify hiding the truth, a whole series of outright lies may be sown as ends-justifying means. Take, for instance, the deliberate diversions, phony messages, intricate cover-ups, or other covertly overt tactics that might precede a surprise attack.

Before we get into the question of whether we are at war today, let’s back up to the definitions and associations around truth and usefulness. If we can simplify a given statement as being either true or false, let’s classify its effect as either 1) that which is positively useful in benefitting your chosen cause or 2) that which is negatively harmful or detrimental to your cause. If we put the dichotomous concepts into the *positive* and *negative* zones of the taijitu and then try to combine those two sets of opposites without any rotation of the circle, it might give the impression

that if you have a good cause, all that is true will support that cause, and all that is false will undermine it:



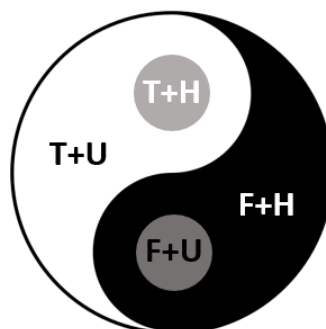
Of course I would like to advance my cause or make my case with any truth that I have at my disposal. And of course I would refute any lies that harm or undermine my cause. That is the foregone, obvious conclusion highlighted as the black and white zones above:

- The white zone shows things that are true and that promote our cause. We seek after these things!
- The black zone shows things that are false and undermine our cause. We disavow these things!

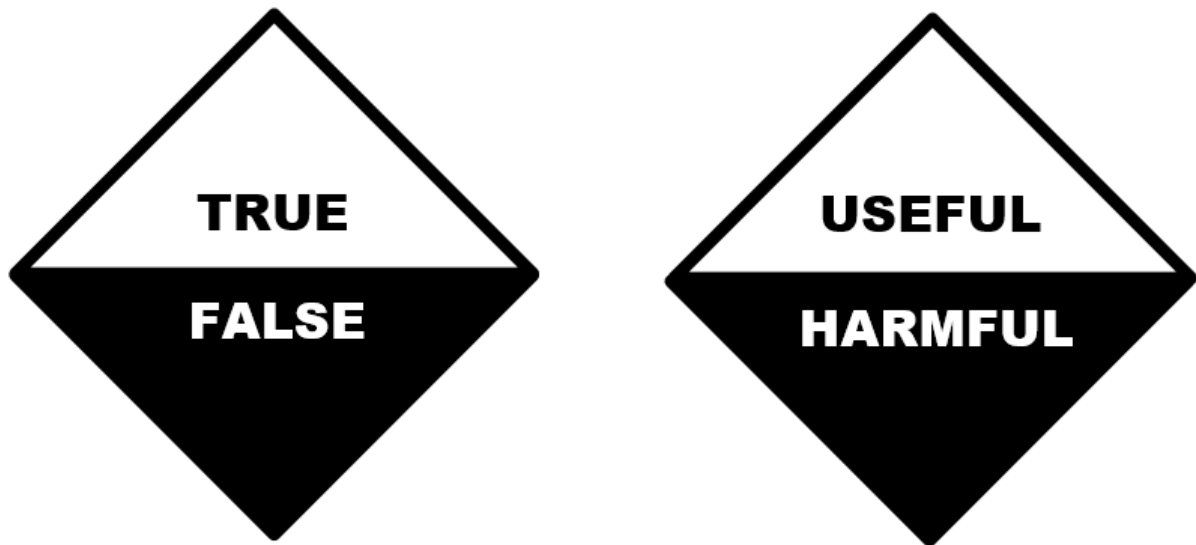
There's no need to cover those black and white areas in any further detail; if life were that simple, we could just end the discussion right here. The dilemma, of course, is that this binary notion is a complete myth. The problem – and the beauty of it all – is reflected in the fact that the real taijitu is not that simple. Here is the more typical representation showing embedded opposites:



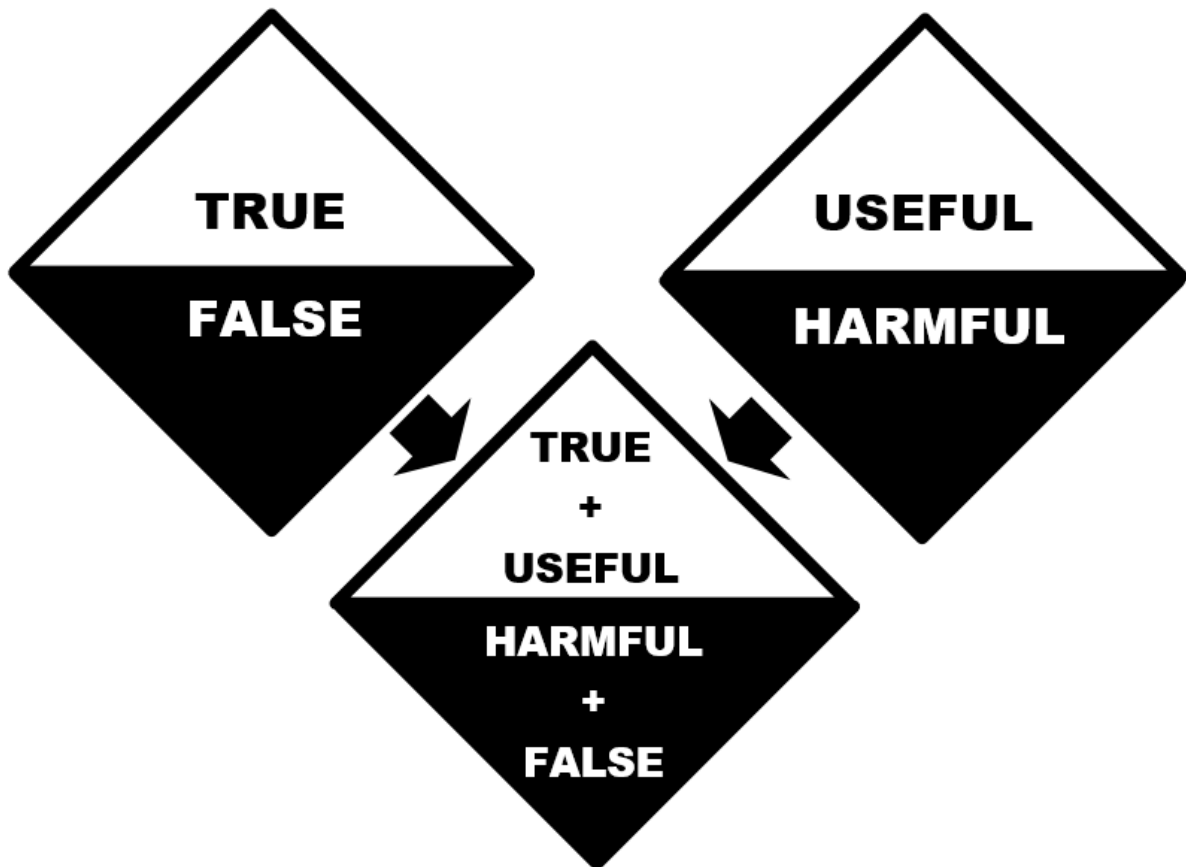
In other words, you have good within bad and bad within good and so forth. So in relation to our example above, some things that are true might be harmful to your cause, no matter how noble that cause might be. And some things that are false might be useful to your cause – quite substantially in some cases! Here's the more realistic taijitu with the grey areas labeled:



To make sense of this for myself, I need to back up and try imagining the symbol another way. I'll try to simplify the concept with squares or diamonds like the DOT hazmat placards on the back of a truck. Let's take a straight-forward, yes-or-no question like True or False and make it half and half. Let's do the same for useful vs. harmful:

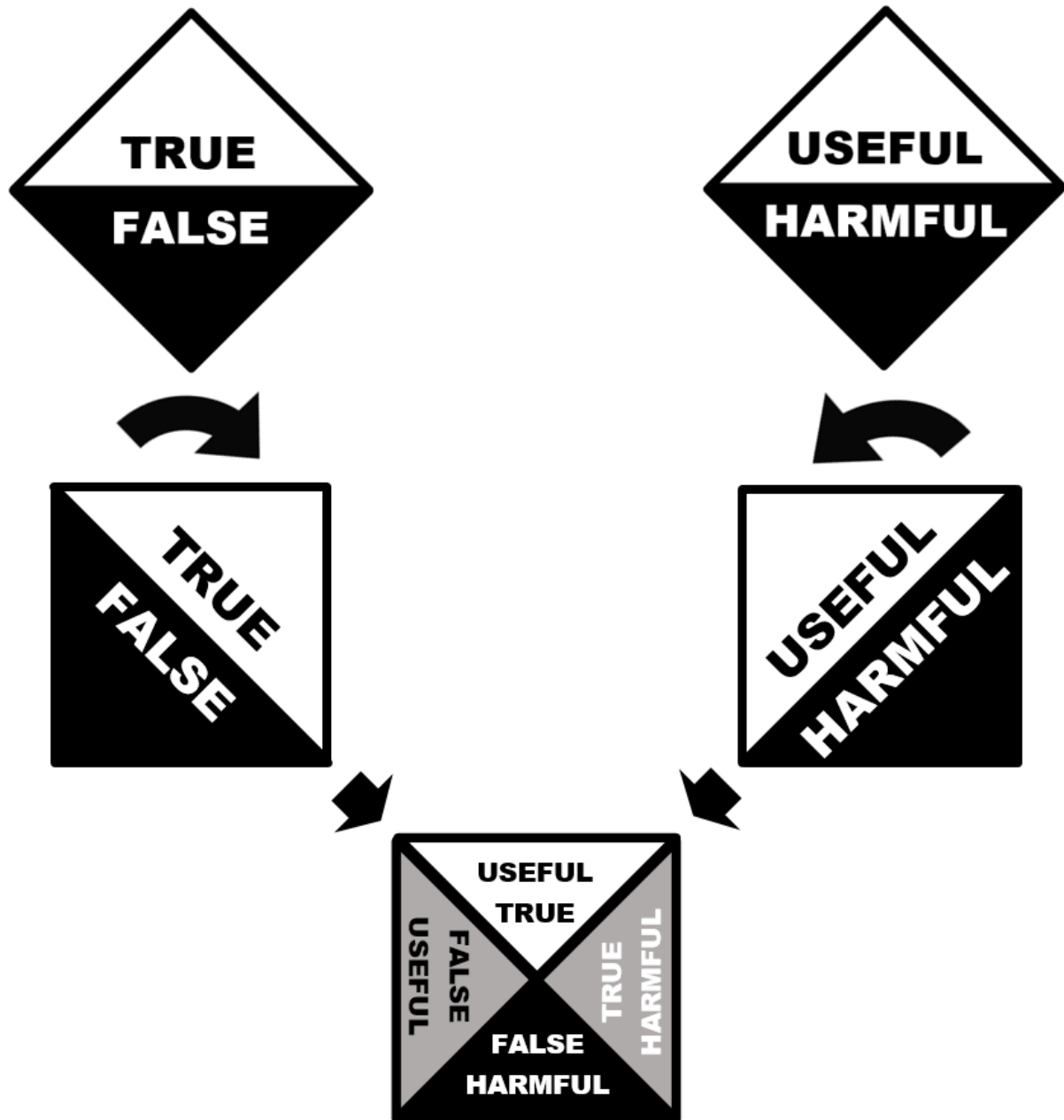


Now let's try combining them, moving them together until they completely overlap and combining the appropriate labels:



Wouldn't it be nice if life worked out like this and we could just slide these opposites together, keeping everything uncomplicated and cleanly binary? Well, it's fun to pretend that things

are that simple; but that's simply not real life! To capture real life, we're going to have to turn these emblems on their side to show all four combinations like in the more intricate taijitu, including falsehoods that benefit your cause and truth that harms it. Once we rotate them opposite each other and then slide them together to combine them into a single composite figure, we find ourselves with the grey areas that I'd like to explore further:



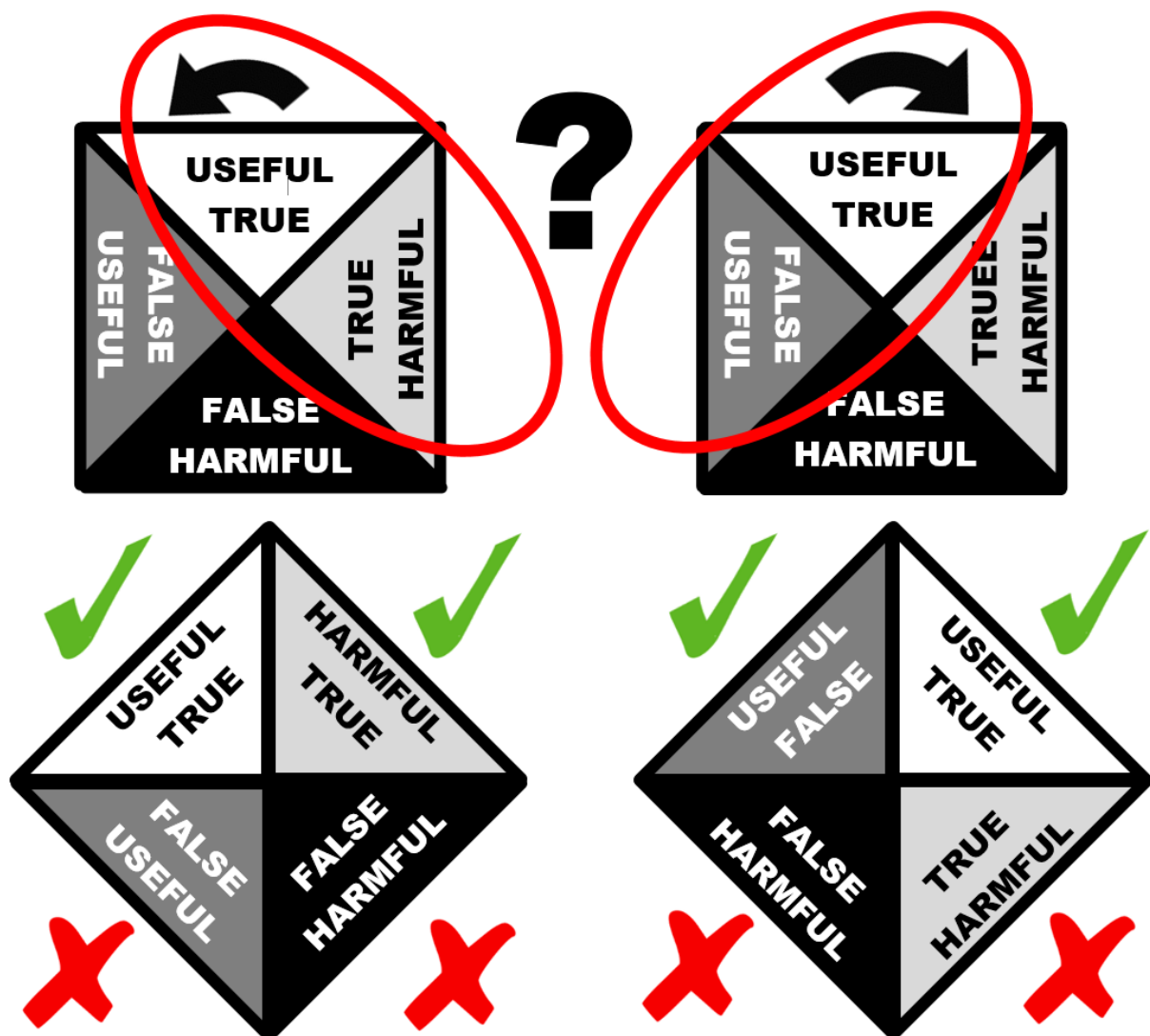
What makes life interesting – and challenging – is how we navigate through the grey areas. Those two grey areas look equally grey, and perhaps equally legitimate. But the two grey zones reflect two completely different questions. Would you rather harm your cause with truth or promote your cause with lies? In other words, if you had to choose between the two:

- Will you accept and promote what's true, regardless of whether it is beneficial or harmful to your cause?
- Or will you accept and promote what benefits your cause, regardless of its truth?

Where do you stand when faced with these choices at home, at work, at church, at school, in politics, or in any other area of your life?

Deciding not to promote something that would harm your cause – a sin of omission - is perhaps more excusable than the commission of outright lies that provide some form of an advantage. We tend to live quite comfortably in the omissive grey area without giving it much thought. Have you ever watched the special features of a movie, for example, where they go through the casting and they say, “This film was an absolute disaster? We never should have made this movie! I wish we had cast Brad Pitt instead of Sean Penn.” No? Maybe that’s the producer’s real, honest opinion, and you might hear that criticism through other channels, but you’ll rarely find defamatory statements right there on the special features of the product being sold. When there’s money at stake, you’re unlikely to get the balanced story. Perhaps the statements that have actually been included on the DVD are true in nature, but the selective omission of harmful (or “useless”) truths is a plain fact of life that is inherent in every relationship and runs through all lines of communication. The question is whether we trust the information at face value, or whether can we see it for what it is by considering its defining context.

I’ll try to map these two choices out by taking the same graphic and rotating it in two differing directions to put the selected grey area on top:



At the left we have the truth coming out on top, ignoring its impact to the cause. On the right we have the cause as the overarching factor, overriding truth itself when the truth harms the cause.

So which one do we choose? I tend to lean to the left with my current inclinations, but it has not always been so. Let's tie these charts into Mormonism, which represents the part of my life during which I leaned the other way: promoting the cause above all else. What is a Mormon's cause? As a standard Sunday School answer, we might define the cause as the advancement of the Gospel or the Kingdom of God, which is in fact prayed for in meeting after meeting in Mormon chapels and temples around the world. If the Kingdom of God is equated to the LDS Church, then "useful" in the charts above means that which benefits or promotes Mormonism, and "harmful" means that which is detrimental to Mormonism or undermines its message.

The danger with Mormonism or any agenda that seeks to promote what is viewed as its own, higher cause is that the truth or falsehood around any given issue becomes irrelevant; what matters most is whether the organization itself is promoted. The message of justifying selective truth and blatant lies to advance a cause seems to bear increasing relevance to U.S. politics, where both Republicans and Democrats promote whatever story advances their party's agenda as the higher cause, regardless of its truth.

The lyrics of an LDS hymn state that the truth that "reflects upon our senses" will reveal the "Gospel light." Others state that "truth shall triumph as the light chases far the misty night" and that truth will outstand "the wreck of the fell tyrant's hopes." [Well, one of the *hopes* of early church leaders was to cleanse the membership of mixed-race babies. So I guess I would agree with the claims in the lyrics, since I do hope that the real truth will withstand the tyrannical, "rude blast" that is referenced in the hymnal.]

There is a flip side to the assumption voiced in the lyrics of the LDS hymns and scriptural works that all truth will promote the Kingdom of God. The equivalent, reverse argument, also echoed in a number of official addresses, is that anything that harms that cause must therefore be false.

At first glance Mormons might agree with both of those statements, assuming that everything that is true will be pro-Mormon (if understood in its proper context and perspective) and everything that is anti-Mormon is false. But, of course, there are plenty of examples showing how some truths harm the Church's cause. Likewise some falsehoods have proven to advance the cause of the Church, at least temporarily.

As for myself, whether it's beneficial or not, I seek the truth, and that can quite readily take me into the grey zone. From where I stand, the impact on the Church's reputation is irrelevant. What matters is what actually happened.

The Church seems to take the opposite view: Church leaders – or at least the public affairs officials, magazine editors, and marketing directors they appoint – seem to seek that which is beneficial to the cause of advancing the Kingdom, whether or not it is true.

I'll try listing a few examples that fit into each of the four categories in the charts above for some context:

1. *True and useful.* Here's a true statement: "Violent crime is less common among Mormons than in the general population." That claim can be backed up with repeatable surveys. A lower prevalence of

violent crime, which is undeniably true, can make a beneficially “useful” case for the cause of Mormonism.

2. *True and harmful.* Here’s a true statement: “LDS Church officials operated a brothel to blackmail non-Mormon politicians.” Running houses of ill repute is not necessarily a good look for the church, but that claim can be backed up with historical records, including my own family history. I’d call this one detrimental or “harmful” to the cause, which probably explains why it has been repeatedly denied and omitted from pioneer histories. It is “not very useful” to use Elder Packer’s jargon.

3. *False and harmful.* The Salamander letter was a made-up forgery. Its contents would appear to be harmful to the Church’s claims, but they are demonstrably false. You might question why the Church wanted to suppress it while they thought it was true, but once exposed as false, anyone who references its forged contents to combat the mission of the Church could rightly be refuted.

4. *False and useful:* The dozens of archeological photographs in my 1980s Book of Mormon lesson manuals are presumably intended to add context but they are absolutely irrelevant to the lesson materials despite their misleading captions. The accompanying videos that I was supposed to show investigators containing so-called archeological proof of the Book of Mormon include blatant falsehoods. Despite containing false statements, the videos and manuals are beneficial or “useful” in dispelling questions and fortifying the faith of the readers, and – by all internal measures and appearances – strengthening the Kingdom of God.

So which of these four examples should be promoted, and which should be dismissed? I’d have no problem with #1 if someone wanted to promote it. As for #2, I feel it ought to be told, which is why I’ve included it in the next chapter. #3 makes for some bizarre reading, but shouldn’t be promoted as truth. As for #4, once effectively debunked, I don’t think the false theories should ever have seen the light of day again, at least not in an attempt to bolster the message.

These four cases seem obvious to me, but let’s step outside the LDS Church with a case study showing that it’s not always such a simple choice:

HMHS *Britannic*, the sister ship of the RMS *Titanic*, was converted to a hospital ship during the First World War. When an explosion ripped a hole in the hull, the captain radioed to the rest of the fleet that they had been struck by a German torpedo. Many of the crew who witnessed the explosion realized that the ship had actually run into a mine, but this information was never relayed to the other ships as part of the distress calls. When the “fake news” hit the press that the Germans had torpedoed a hospital ship, breaking all rules of engagement, the anger that galvanized in response helped to turn the tide of the war.



Sinking of HMHS Britannic © Ken Marschall

So if you were the First Mate, knowing that false information had been disseminated to your countrymen, would you bother to issue a correction and tell the truth? Or would you let the falsehood stand, knowing that it supports your cause?

Well, if this lie indeed helped end the war, so be it! Let the lie stand! Wouldn't you agree? The truth in this case might have prolonged the deadliest conflict the planet had ever seen, potentially resulting in the alternate reality of an Allied defeat. Besides, all sorts of espionage was actively underway at the time, and neither side presumed to hold transparency as an underlying motive. If any nation's spy agencies divulged all that is true, there would be nothing left for them to try to protect. Wasn't a bit of negative PR aimed at the Kaiser worth the cost of a little lie to the British government?

Taking it back to Mormonism, my LDS family and friends have all gradually been made aware of some of the lies that have been disseminated by the Church over the last few decades. So what's the difference here? Why do they let the lies stand while I claim that the truth should be told? How can they send their children around the world to disseminate a book claiming that Hor is Abraham, when he's clearly not?

I believe the question comes down to whether we are at war. I believe my Mormon friends and family would say yes. If that is indeed the case, truth becomes irrelevant, and the effect of any piece of information on the war's outcome – being either beneficial or detrimental to it – becomes the key consideration. If we are engaged in a raging battle with evil forces, wouldn't that require clandestine operations, covert tactics, undercover espionage, and sly subterfuge? Or how about *stratagem*, to use a Mormon term that the good guys sometimes have to revert to in times of war?

War justifies subversive tactics because war just isn't fair. So go ahead and trick your enemy; lie to them if needed. It's all part of the game, after all; in Moroni's words, it is "no sin." I can certainly understand the motives of those who fight for a religious cause, including, for example, those on both sides during the crusades. Both sides believed they were trying to save heathens and infidels from hell, after all. Do I understand the motives? Yes. Condone the actions? Hell no!

Mormons live with the expectation that we'll find out the rest of the story in the next life, proving that as long as we followed the direction of Church leaders, we will find ourselves having been in the right all along, even if we had to suppress the temporal truth in mortality. Just like the hindsight with which we can justify the propagation of misinformation about the Britannic, the ultimate explanation originating from an eternal perspective will absolve any deceit wrapped up in "lying for the Lord." And boy will the doubters and haters be sorry at that point!

Fast forward to the 1980s, and we have two Cold War-era civilian airliners that were mistakenly shot out of the sky by paranoid military forces. The Korean Airlines flight that was shot down by the Soviets in 1983 and the Iranian passenger plane that was downed by the U.S. in 1988 share some striking similarities. The initial reactions by both of the guilty superpowers was identical: Deny, divert, blatantly lie! Preserve your own ideology's reputation above all else!

Both incidents were utter tragedies for all of the innocent victims and their families. But looking back on it from today's vantage point, it is not the outright lying and deceit that bothers me most about the aftermath. In fact, that reaction is to be expected given the hostility between nations at the time. What bothers me personally is my own inability to recognize the dichotomy at the time. When the Soviets were caught in their lie, I thought to myself, "what an evil regime," and I hoped the truth would be proclaimed from the rooftops. When the U.S. was caught in its own lie, on the other hand, I thought, "of course we needed to preserve the Navy's good name, let's hope this goes

away quickly,” since publicity around the tragedy would arm our enemies with anti-American sentiment. Why the differing reaction? The hypocrisy is obvious to me now, but only in hindsight: Propaganda and territorialism masked as patriotism!



Mass funerals in Iran for victims of Iran Air Flight 655

The missteps of those who prematurely pulled the triggers in these events might be blamed on the perceived state of emergency at the time. States of emergency warrant the adoption of martial law, under which truth no longer matters. Victory is the overarching cause, and truth is irrelevant until victory is attained.

Unfortunately, most religious zealots live in a state of perpetual martial law where victory trumps the truth on a daily basis. In that state, common folk implementing the will of their commanding officers are left having to assume that those issuing the orders have access to higher intelligence and will act in the best interest of their constituents; after all, you can't blame the messenger!

If we have actually been embroiled in an unseen, all-out war, I guess I've been fighting on the wrong side all along. If this really is wartime, perhaps I ought to switch sides now and encourage subversion through clandestine, subversive tactics, trying to topple the LDS regime from the inside. I could pretend to be on board with the program, for example, while underhandedly attempting to dismantle it. Well, I have no desire to be that guy, but I understand that real wartime scenarios generate a demand for those sorts of characters. In that respect, I understand those who do take that approach with religion as well, secretly recording meeting minutes and temple ceremonies, for example, by lying their way through interviews to get their fake ID in the form of a recommend. Those who engage in these sorts of practices may feel that the rules of engagement no longer apply because there has been a declaration of war.

My preference, on the other hand, is to be honest about my concerns and to encourage change through mutually consensual progress – in the form of agreements and transparency between the leadership and the lay members.

I just can't bring myself to adopt the notion that we are all foot soldiers in a timeless, global battle that warrants distorting or purposefully omitting the truth related to one selected religious body while exposing the dark secrets of all the others; but I admit I might be wrong about my assessment of the current state of war, or the lack thereof. I'm not blessed – or cursed as the case

may be – with the ability to perceive anything in the supernatural spectrum that others in my life claim to possess. So I'm in no real position to comment on the matter, but if there is indeed an underlying, unseen war going on, I would have to believe that the battle is for kindness and perspective and standing up against malice and narrow-mindedness, not against verifiably legitimate documents that need to be manipulated, sanitized, and regurgitated in alternate form to protect reputations and avoid raising questions about the past. I just can't convince myself that there could be a bona fide battle focused on getting souls to swallow reprocessed, bite-size portions and pass through gateways that are blocked by so much historical baggage that free-thinking people have to deprive themselves of all sensibilities to take each successive, requisite step. Sorry, but when you add the bigger picture in which even that arbitrarily absurd choice is only available to the smallest fraction of humanity, in my view that just can't be the battle!

As difficult as I find it to accept that notion, I do accept and understand that many Mormons view the world through the lens of tactical binoculars. And I understand the inclination to sacrifice individual inclinations for what is seen as the greater good. This applies to many facets of life outside of religion. Let's fast forward again and have a look at Clinton's impeachment, for example. To me the case, although reprehensibly unfortunate, eventually provided a positive impact on the world as far as helping to give women a needed voice and showing that an intern can confront the President himself and be believed in the end. Billions upon billions of dollars were lost when the market reacted to the news of Clinton's indiscretions, and the U.S. reputation in the world dropped considerably with each of the humiliating revelations surrounding the case. Was it worth it?

It seems like a noble cause to choose an individual over the system; in the movies that always seems to be the right thing to do. Maybe Clinton's actions warranted taking down even the highest office of the nation; maybe the truth was more important than the economic and political consequences. But if you were a deeply patriotic victim yourself, knowing the effect that the revelation would have on the country, would you sacrifice yourself and stay silent to keep that system running? Those with much to lose did their utmost to silence the matter by confronting the accusers with these global consequences, trying to convince them to take the hit for the National team with their silence. Although that was a popular viewpoint at the time, nowadays there aren't many voices of support for Clinton's lies.

Taking the question from patriotism back to religion, if your belief system is perceived as an exclusive, universal truth, perhaps you would opt for taking the hit to keep that system intact. If someone really believes in an end-all system, it is perhaps understandable that they would give up their own life, their integrity, or their reputation to preserve that system. But sad experience has shown that people are – less understandably – willing to throw their own children under the bus if news of their abuse would shake the diocese, for example. Or as I have seen in my own Mormon circles, send their daughter away to avoid the bad reputation a Mormon family would get if they happen to acknowledge her pregnancy, ignore her wishes, and force an adoption through the repetition of prophetic mandates. Or tell their gay son to get with the program and find a good Mormon girl to cure his disease. Or disown their daughter for marrying a black man. Or send their gun-crazy kid to lessons where he learns that shedding blood is good if it saves a Godly nation. I have to admit that I share in the collective guilt of having participated in a program that promoted these things and more. These are real people that I really took the sacrament with in real chapels. Real people who really sacrificed those they claimed to love to avoid harming the reputation of an institution they loved even more...or perhaps better said, their own reputations within that institution.

When there is a failure within a religious institution or among any individuals who make up the religious body, there is an understandable tendency to cover it up. But in the bigger picture, those failures can be vital to progress and to the prevention of future shortcomings. The truth can be useful, even if it hurts. It may appear harmful in the short term, but in the end, it will benefit everything that really matters. Unless, of course, you're under the paranoid delusion that everyone is out to get you and the devil needs propaganda to fuel the fire that he has raging against you. Then by all means, try to keep any ammunition out of his hands! God help us if that's the case!



The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?

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I'm a big fan of allowing prospective missionaries to learn the full story before going out into the "field" trying to promote one doctored version of it. I've spoken to friends who have taken the deep dive into Mormon history themselves, and claim to be able to see things from both sides, but they wouldn't dare share the things they find with their kids who are contemplating missionary service. It would be like feeding them indigestible meat too soon, as if they would get sick and keel over by learning the facts too early, while the slowly inoculating version, on the other hand, would digest quite comfortably.

To me, it's like a delusional product salesman who is so sure the hawked product is awesome that he deletes the negative reviews as his customers are considering their own purchase. I'm not talking about fake, mud-slinging reviews, I'm talking about real situations that happened to real people who found out that the real product they purchased really didn't do what the ads said they did, and weren't even sourced from the materials claimed in the customs forms.

"Don't you think that's a bit dangerous?" I asked one of my friends recently, explaining that his son would be confronted with facts about Joseph Smith's philandering and mistranslations – facts that nobody bothered to tell him about – before offering up a few years of his life?

His answer was that his children don't need to hear the evidence for and against, because those who bring up the evidence against the Church are not the kind of people missionaries should be dealing with.

What? People who weigh things out reasonably don't have any part in the Mormon village? Missionaries should only engage those with open hearts, I was told. As for the rest of the population who have Google at their disposal to fact-check the contents of the discussions after the missionaries leave, the message is clear: "Keep walking, there's nothing for you here."



The underlying message is that we want only people who act on emotion and ignore facts. True truth-seekers are out. People with a propensity for internet surfing shouldn't be allowed in. People who think they deserve answers to their questions shouldn't be engaged. Instead, we want to attract kids who want to learn English or who like to play baseball or soccer with missionaries but don't give a damn about religion. They probably won't bring up evidence against the Church, so they can be fed one side of the story and "protected" from anything negative. So that's who we should be baptising? Crazy as it sounds, if you look at the statistics, apparently that has been the overwhelming consensus in many parts of the world.

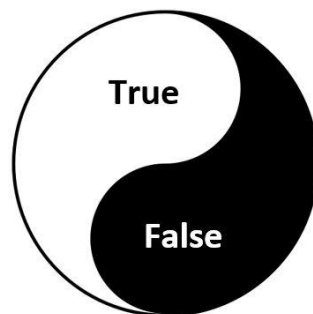
I am guilty of having employed these tactics myself, not just in religion but in my professional life as well. In my former roles as a consultant, I have written up business plans that then came back to me with the red-lined instruction to remove the negative bits. I have complied with those requests out of my own self-interest. If I didn't do it, somebody else surely would. There are people who produce these documents full time and make their money by selecting which bits to remove; it's simply part of their daily routine. Much like Wolfgang, I complied, promoted the party line, and covered up the uncomfortable parts, feeling that it wasn't my role to bring them up. I sure wasn't comfortable with it the first time it happened. But then it got easier with each page, and I gradually got used to it. And the next year I didn't bother to mention the risks at all. But in the end, when those redacted risks all came true, and I found myself with my butt on the line, I couldn't say, "I told you so!" because I had no documentation to back it up.

Am I so unique after all? Every time I attend an industry conference I receive an e-mail upon its conclusion about how it was a great success. Well, I expect nothing less. I wouldn't think the organizers would dive into any technical glitches, sub-par presentations, or upside-down finances, even if those had been true elements of the conference. So when I hear positive, glossy statement about conferences or other events, it doesn't shock me. The purpose of the conference wrap-up is to get attendees to come back again next year. The whole truth might not be "useful" in serving that purpose and is understandably suppressed the same way Wolfgang knew he couldn't include all of the internal risks in the public shareholder report.

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Binarity

I'm not putting easy, obvious, yes-or-no answers out there. If it were that easy, I could have quickly reached my conclusions without having to first walk myself through each of the hypothetical analogies like Wolfgang's to determine out where I stand and how to navigate the grey areas. Back to the elusive taijitu that used to reflect my view of the world:



I now reject the pervading all-or-nothing mentality within Mormonism whereby anything can be simply classified as all true or all false. To keep up that façade within the Church, we have to suppress some truths while distorting, denying, or redefining others. The many scriptural quotes

that are used to support that binary thought process can lead to the following, mutually exclusive, conflicting statements:

- If any of it is true, all of it is true.
- If any of it is false, all of it is false.

Let's take speculation out of the verdict, ignoring feelings or internal beliefs. You'll never conclusively be able to prove what someone says they saw or heard or felt. But if we limit the discussion around truth to just plain, event-based history, we can be more definitive. "Were you there?" That is an absolutely unarbitrary question. These atoms, molecules, and cells were either present at the reported time or they were not. They either moved in this direction or they did not. Some incidents can be classified in such a binary format: Was this piece of papyrus in Abraham's possession? Was this thigh bone on a Lamanite battlefield? Was this rock on Adam's altar? Either these things did occur, or they did not. Yes or no. Fact or fiction. True or false.

As far as the Mormon incarnation of the Gospel itself being true versus false, why should the question be limited to those two possibilities? Isn't it entirely possible for someone to be inspired to do something and then let their own ego or ignorance get in the way? Sure, but if you take that view, can you claim that the whole Church is true? The more I look into it, the less realistic an "all-true" conclusion appears. I reject that reality!

So back to the two grey areas:

- There are things that are true that undermine our cause. Mormons sweep these things under the carpet but perhaps shouldn't.
- There are things that are false that promote our cause. Mormons keep using these but perhaps shouldn't.

Say you have always stood for a cause that benefits many, many people, devoting your whole life to it, but a personal indiscretion is going to destroy it all. This was Jean Valjean's dilemma. Of course, he's the protagonist hero, so he stays true to his convictions; readers assume his self-sacrifice was the right answer in the end. But I don't think that choice would be that clear to the common man, myself included. If I was absolutely convinced that no one would ever find out about a poor choice that I made, and if I could be confident that no harm would be done, would I bring the truth to light if the question were asked – just for truth's sake? And if only one soul would suffer under a criminal cover-up, but many would benefit from it, shouldn't that crime be committed? Isn't that what Nephi himself proclaimed about Laban?

Now let's apply the same question to a personal mission statement. If I had to choose some cause that I would wish to promote during the years I have left, something I hope would outlive me that I could pass along from my death bed, what would it be? I guess today my answer would be that I hope to have contributed something that helps people to care about each other, the planet, and themselves. To enjoy life, be good to others, and so on. Pretty ordinary stuff, I guess.

So when those I leave behind start sifting through my possessions, what if there is a box that contains a record of things I have done that run counter to that vision? You don't want your enemies to latch onto every negative piece of information and destroy you with it – not if you believe your cause to be just! If you believe whole-heartedly in your cause, and if it trumps everything else, why would you ever expose those things that hurt your reputation? Should I burn that box now in anticipation of that day?

If you consider your reputation, your image, and your legacy to be as critical to your cause as VW's branding is to its own standing, are you going to issue one whitewashed document with a public cover and another, separate volume with internal warnings to your own posterity?

If you've ever made a mistake – as of course we all have – your past can come back to haunt you, even long after you are gone. Enough legacies have been posthumously destroyed by scandals to make that point a thousand times over. My mistakes form part of my own history. Some of them undermine the causes I want to promote. Or do they? When I have done things contradict the cause I wish to promote, would the knowledge of my activities convince others that those ideals are not worth chasing?

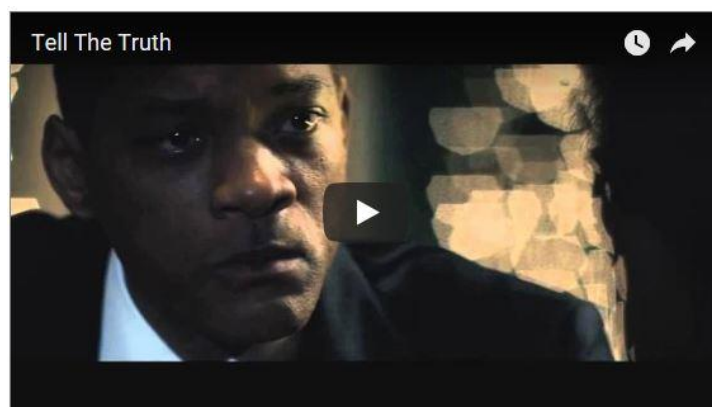
I would hope not. To me it seems the legacies that have been destroyed are generally due to the exposition of secrets and cover-ups. When someone of their own volition, without blackmail or coercion, owns their mistakes, a new, more realistic, more effective legacy can be forged.

When I voiced my own concerns about the Church to those in supposed authority over me, I was told that it's ok to question these things for myself, as long as I keep quiet and don't rock the boat. In their eyes, speaking up would not be "very useful" to the cause. The only option I was given was to bury my objections, stay silent for the next couple of decades, and comfortably leave this life without ever having referenced the voyage of discovery that toppled my former convictions.

I couldn't do it. If you're reading this today, it means I just couldn't manage to keep my big mouth shut. Unfortunately, as I have seen, you instantly lose your validity when you become an outsider to Mormonism, but outside the bubble is the only place I can feel genuinely comfortable at the moment; so my voice may fall on deaf ears given my current state of disillusionment, but so be it. This is part of my story, and promoting the truth is part of my cause.

I hope you stand for your own cause, whatever it may be. It may differ from mine, but reaching our unique, individual conclusions and expressing the truth of our own pathways to each other is our right as fellow humans. When you write your own history, I would hope that you will want to advance your cause at whatever cost is required...except the truth. Yes, some things that are true are harmful to a cause, and the assumed advice behind Kant's words – and Packer's paraphrase – is that the truth should be selectively omitted when needed to avoid harming the cause. But if the cause comes at the price of truth, then we might counter those words with the personal view of J. Reuben Clark (who embarked on a similar journey as I have begun and yet still got a BYU building named after himself): "If we have not the truth, it ought to be harmed."

I'll close with a brief public service announcement from Brother Will:



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## Chapter 7: Character Witness

### **My Analogy: The Emperor's New Bronco**

*"If the glove fits..."*

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Buford "Buffy" Kaelin

If you took a snapshot of the U.S. in 1995, you could probably have divided the entire population into two distinct groups: those who thought OJ was guilty and those who thought he was innocent; given the media saturation, any fence sitters likely ended up with an inclination one way or another that would have shifted the balance if they were forced to choose.

Some of Simpson's friends, like Robert Kardashian, stood solidly behind him in the beginning but eventually came to doubt his innocence in the face of overwhelming evidence. Others, like Buford "Buffy" Kaelin, continue to support OJ's innocence to this day. Buffy didn't know OJ personally before the homicides, but he had once stayed overnight in Simpson's guest house with his cousin Kato, who shared his last name. Buffy became engrossed in the trial when Kato ended up being called to testifying against OJ. While Kato suspected OJ's guilt, Buffy was convinced that OJ had been wrongly framed by the police. Buffy was a law student at the time, but during most days of the 11-month trial, he skipped his classes, went straight to the courthouse, and waited in line, hoping to get one of the coveted courtroom seats. Whether he heard the testimony in person or through the media outlets, he kept detailed notes of every day's proceedings. He always carried his favorite briefcase with him, and by the time the trial ended, the briefcase was packed solid with his scribbled notes. Overriding his legal assessment was the one-way emotional connection he had forged with the man on trial, and he actually cried with joy the day OJ was acquitted.

The subsequent civil trial, however, had a different outcome, and Buffy took the verdict personally. Following the trial, he started meeting regularly with a group of fellow OJ supporters who became increasingly convinced that the police were in a conspiracy and couldn't be trusted. They decided to form an official club dedicated to OJ's innocence. The neighbors started calling them the Simpsonites, but Buffy wanted everyone to see OJ as he did: like a kind-hearted, older brother who should be addressed on a first-name basis; he decided they should be called *Orenthites*, after his heroic idol, Brother Orenthal James Simpson. His adherents unanimously agreed to adopt the name.

Given their mistrust in law enforcement and politicians, the Orenthites found it safer to withdraw to a compound in the Brentwood Hills that they purchased with pooled money. Buffy was excited to have a place to display his OJ memorabilia, which he set up in the front window and throughout the main entrance.



In the back yard, the Orenthites planted an orchard of orange trees to symbolize their devotion to “the Juice”. Buffy spent much of his time grafting branches from this orchard and planting smaller and smaller trees until he finally perfected a potted plant that still bore an orange fruit. The fruit itself tasted like an orange, but the seeds were chewy and sweet like jellybeans. On admission to the club, Buffy would give each new adherent their own “beansai” tree to mark their commitment to OJ’s cause.

In the evenings, they would hold parties where they played reruns of OJ’s NFL playoff games and Naked Gun movies starring OJ in his comedic roles. Once a month, all of the Orenthites would get together to hold a *recitation meeting* in which each member of their club stood up and recited the line, “I know that OJ is innocent!”

“Guiltless!” the other attendees would reply in unison.

Many of the Orenthites based their conviction on what they knew of OJ’s character and never bothered to look at the evidence for or against his alleged involvement in any crime. If an outsider ever brought up the murder charges, it would immediately be met with a statement about OJ’s character:

“I’ve seen all of OJ’s movies and football games, and the OJ I know wouldn’t and couldn’t have done anything like that!”

As his compound grew, Buffy gained quite a bit of media exposure and became popular with talk show hosts. In an interview with David Letterman, he was asked why he continued to carry the same briefcase with him that he had during the trial.

“During the trial,” he answered, “I went back to the crime scene and found absolute proof of OJ’s innocence.”

“And the evidence is right there in that briefcase?” Letterman asked, “Well let’s see it!”

“Sorry, Dave, I’m the only one with the key,” Buffy replied, “and you’re just going to have to trust me on this.”

With that late-night exposure, the briefcase got so much attention that Buffy handcuffed it to his wrist and took it with him everywhere he went, telling anyone who asked that the contents would be sealed and classified until his own death.

Of course, there has been a lot of speculation in the meantime about what is actually inside the briefcase. Could it contain secret government documents that show an intricate framing process? Could he have found the murder weapon with OJ’s son Jason’s fingerprints, showing that OJ was only taking the fall for his son the whole time? Or maybe Buffy himself was the culprit!

Nowadays most sceptics think it’s completely empty, but the Orenthites continue to believe that the contents of the briefcase will exonerate them all. And they take it a bit further in claiming that anyone who ever doubted OJ’s innocence will be very, very sorry in the end. In fact, Buffy began preaching a few years ago that the evidence in the briefcase will be so overwhelming that those who doubted its contents will themselves be put in prison, implicated with the complicit guilt of having doubted OJ’s innocence in the first place.

At the same time all of the actual evidence that was presented in court, if not completely ignored by the Orenthites, is considered to have been planted by secret agents from international superpowers in a deliberate, grand scheme that was orchestrated to test everyone’s allegiance to OJ and to prove whether or not they actually stood by him during the trial.

“Do not associate with those who think he is guilty,” Buffy has said, “And especially don’t read any newspaper reports that claim to contain confessions from OJ himself – that’s just the agents trying to trick him!”

During the recitation meetings, Buffy would encourage those who had any doubts to stop looking at evidence and focus on OJ’s character.

“It feels so good to say it,” Buffy preached, “and someday everyone will know that feeling. How do you feel when you say he is innocent?”

“I feel good!”

“Do you believe it?”

“Yes!”

“Well then you know it!”

“Yes, we *know* that he is innocent!” was the unanimous reply to his closing testimony at the end of each meeting.

Buffy continued to gain adherents with these sorts of speeches; due to schedule demands, however, his followers saw less and less of him. Eventually he ended up hiring an agent named Ted Cooper from among his loyal followers to handle his PR. One of the first changes was to start calling Buffy by a more proper name. At every chance, Ted began to introduce Buffy as “President Buford B. Kaelin.”

Ted recommended focusing all of the outreach efforts on a single Orenthite gala where President Kaelin would appear once a year sporting a fancy tuxedo and carrying his famous briefcase down the red carpet.

Every year Kaelin went through the same routine for the annual event, carefully orchestrated by Ted the PR man. Attendance was limited to card-carrying Orenthites, but eventually their numbers grew enough that bollards and barriers had to be erected to keep the cheering crowd and their cameras at a safe distance. Ted's PR department issued a press release before each gala talking about the fancy suit Kaelin would be wearing for the evening's festivities; the red-carpet issue covering the gala was a big seller in all of the next day's tabloids.



Orenthite photo op with Kaelin's replica Bronco parked outside the red-carpet gala

Despite its apparent success, however, Ted began to notice that every year a small number of dissenters walked away from the parade saying, "He wasn't wearing any clothes!"

Eventually Ted noticed that proceeds from ticket sales were beginning to decline, so he initiated opinion surveys to track the trends. He surveyed those who left early and found that many had vowed never to return. In trying to establish trends he found that most of the dissenters had crossed the tape before coming to their naked conclusion.

Ted hired extra security and had his construction committee beef up the crowd control fence. He enlisted his best marketing experts to develop a campaign encouraging faithful followers to stay behind the barriers. The underlying message to group members was, "Don't get too close or things will get ugly."

This statement made some of the loyal subjects a bit curious. During the next gala event, some climbed over the new fence and were promptly met by security guards who handed out citations summoning them to appear in an Orenthite "discipline court."

The debate around the distancing rules had also found its way to Ted's son, Travis. Travis still wanted to follow the rules, but he decided to invest in a fancy camera with a powerful zoom lens for the red-carpet ceremony. What he found shocked him to the core.

"Hang on a second," he told Ted in a frantic cell phone call right in the middle of Buffy's catwalk, "it turns out those troublemakers were right after all!"

"No, no, no. You've got to doubt your own eyes," Ted replied, trying to calm him down, "You must have bought a bogus zoom lens."

“But Buffy isn’t wearing any clothes!”

“Listen, I’ve got to go,” Ted said, “Can we discuss this in person tomorrow.”

After the event, one of the crowd control officers approached Travis and handed him an official piece of paper summoning him to the court. On his way home, he passed a group of fence-jumpers who had been detained and noticed that they all had similar-looking documents.

The next day he took his seat around a large board room table in the Orenthite conference building. Most of the other chairs were still empty by the time Ted entered. The other detainees Travis had passed hadn’t bothered to show up for the hearing.

“Listen,” Ted told the small group, “If you think you’ve realized that President Kaelin isn’t wearing any clothes, that’s perfectly fine; in fact, you may be right.”

“What?” gasped the dissidents.

“It’s totally ok,” Ted continued, “and there’s a perfectly good explanation. In fact, we’ll be issuing some official statements about it soon. Just don’t tell the rest of the crowd in the meantime. You wouldn’t want to ruin their party now would you?”

Travis and his fellow doubters all agreed that it would be a shame to shut down the annual gala, but they weren’t sure what to do with their new-found realization.

Before wrapping up the meeting, Ted handed each of them a copy of his book, “Kaelin’s Kool Klothes,” which had just been released in a new printing.

Travis flipped through the book and rolled his eyes. He had never found the contents very interesting, but his old edition had at least included pictures. This one was just hundreds of pages of text, outlining the source of each of the textiles comprising Kaelin’s wardrobe along with endless descriptions of the fabrication process.

“Read it over and over until you can see the beauty in it,” Ted advised, “And remember, don’t mention any of this to the others.”

Travis went home feeling completely confused, but in the end he decided to follow the gag order faithfully and attend the required recitation meetings – though he caught himself throwing up in his mouth just a bit upon hearing absolute convictions about the Kaelin’s wonderful wardrobe.

Travis and the other silent dissidents only spoke to each other in secret and avoided open discussions of their doubts, even among their own families. In their private discussions with each other, they realized that they had each come to the same conclusion, including the perfectly understandable fact that those around them who continued to believe in Kaelin’s clothes just hadn’t looked closely enough.

They ended up piecing together the whole story. As it turned out, Kaelin didn’t own any clothes at all; in fact, he hated wearing them altogether. He even claimed to be allergic to fabric, so his streaking tendencies weren’t even his fault. But Ted’s team included some superb artists, including highly skilled body painters. Each night before the gala, the painters would spend hours and hours applying intricate body art for his annual appearance to his Orenthite patrons.

A few whistle blowers began to promote the truth about the body paint among the mainstream Orenthites. Though these charges were generally dismissed as a grand delusion, ticket sales to the next gala started dropping more steeply than ever before. Travis still enjoyed the annual

gala, but part of his enjoyment was centered around looking through his zoom lens at all of the things he hadn't seen before.

He ended up snapping some pictures of President Kaelin that made it glaringly obvious that the clothes were just painted on. He initially kept the photos for himself until he attended one particularly disturbing recitation meeting where the other Orenthites threatened to evict anyone who dared to speak of President Kaelin's nakedness. He decided that real evidence might help combat this lack of tolerance, so he distributed the photos to his friends...and promptly found himself holding a cease and desist order.

Seeing how this alarming trend was affecting his own family, Ted started holding meetings with the board of directors to plot a way forward; they decided issue a press release from the PR department to redefine the word *clothes* and give President Kaelin the new title of Emperor.

At the next recitation meeting, Ted read the official statement from the pulpit:

"You may have heard allegations that Emperor Kaelin has no clothes. Well, if you look up the true definition of the word, clothes can be defined as a covering. The Emperor has *covered* his body with paint; therefore he *is* wearing clothes, and we've been right all along."

The audience members oohed and aahed in amazement at this explanation.

"A latex rainsuit is clothing, wouldn't you agree?" Ted asked.

Everyone nodded.

"Well the body paint that the artists apply to the Emperor for the gala is actually latex-based, you see?"

More nods came from the audience.

"So body paint is clothing, yes?"

"Yes!" said the faithful followers.

Ted pulled out a list of names from his discipline meetings. Pointing his finger at some of the silent sceptics in the audience, he began speaking ominously.

"So who is lying here? Certainly not me!"

His adherents looked around, hoping Ted's finger wouldn't land on them.

"Those who say Emperor Kaelin is not wearing clothes are the real liars," Ted said, "We don't want to associate with liars, so please delete them from your contact lists."

Faithful adherents obliged, and from that day forward, in addition to their recitation meetings, the Orenthites began to hold weekly workshops entitled "Body paint is beautiful!"

The workshops fulfilled their intended purpose in quieting the dissenters and slowing the exodus. Now welcome to look closely at Emperor Kaelin's beautiful "clothes" in the upcoming parade without police tape or barricades, ticket sales actually began to increase.

Travis himself decided to fall in line and put his earlier doubts aside. Ted's explanation that they had been fed the truth all along seemed like a stretch, but in the end, he acknowledged that it was a viable loophole.

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*Bean Boozled*



But each night Travis would stare across the room at his own beansai tree and wonder what else might not be as it seems. Each beansai tree came with a chain of custody certificate stating that it was a bona fide tree tracing its roots back to the original tree that Kaelin grafted from OJ's Brentwood estate yard. Travis always felt good that he could trace the tree that he had received from his father, Ted, back through to Kaelin and all the way to OJ himself.

Each beansai tree also came with an instruction manual on how to care for it. The cover page of the manual included the following statement:

"A beansai tree is like a bonsai tree, only it grows fruit. And not just any fruit. When you open up the beansai fruit, its seeds are the most delicious orange jellybeans."

That part always sounded nice to Travis, and he had always enjoyed the jellybeans that he found inside the fruit that appeared on his tree each morning; but the manual also included a dire warning:

"Do not under any circumstances touch the stem," the warning read, "or you may be asked to leave the compound."

Travis looked at the fruit on his own tree. Realizing that his closer look through the zoom lens had led to the concessions about Kaelin's clothes, he decided to ignore the warnings and have a closer look at the stem of his tree.

What he found shocked him to the core: The branches had simply been stapled to the stem, and the fruit was just glued to the branch! Travis decided to pull out one of the staples, and the branch fell right off. The fruit fell right along with it and just squashed on the floor. He had never even noticed the glue on the fruit that he peeled each morning.

Travis simply couldn't believe what he had found. Each of his siblings had proudly displayed their trees in their own rooms while they were growing up. Were theirs fakes as well? Travis decided to call each of them to let them know he had found out his tree was a fake.

"Have you checked yours?" he asked.

"No need," they replied.

"But you should have a look at the stem!"

"Sorry, the manual says not to look at the stem, just look at the fruit!"

“But...”

“In fact, the fine print in the manual says that if you touch the stem at all, the whole tree will die.”

“I checked mine,” Travis said, “It was already dead!”

“Well then you must have killed it by digging around too much.”

“I guess I can’t speak for yours – maybe you got a good one,” Travis conceded, “But mine’s a fake!”

“Don’t be so sure of yourself.”

“Well, when I turned over one of the leaves, I found a sticker that says it’s made in Hong Kong,” Travis said, “So how can we go around saying it was made right here in Brentwood?”

“I’ll bet a hater just put that sticker there to try to fool you.”

“What? Seriously?”

“Yes, don’t you remember you’re supposed to *doubt your doubts*?”

Travis saw that these discussions weren’t going to go anywhere so he decided to write straight to Kaelin himself with his concerns.

He received a lengthy, written response outlining how Hong Kong originally included a small island named Beanola, a colony where the first beansai trees were grown and grafted. So all of the beansai trees, including OJ’s tree, came from the same source.

“So the sticker is true,” read the response, “And the manual is true. And the staples are true. And the oranges are true. And the jellybeans are true. And the glue is true...and OJ is innocent!”

“You can see that connection, can’t you?” asked Kaelin in his final remarks.

Travis couldn’t see the slightest relevance to OJ or make any sense of the other explanations, so he started searching the internet for any mention of the details Kaelin had offered. Not a trace of the Beanola story or any other supposed evidence showed up on Google.

Travis decided he couldn’t keep up the charade any longer and scheduled a meeting to sit down with Kaelin in person. He brought along his beansai tree to back up his story.

“I couldn’t find anything about the tree’s origin online,” Travis said as they sat down together.

“Of course not,” said Kaelin, “All the records about Beanola have been lost. But what are you doing on Google in the first place? Didn’t we tell you to stay off the internet?”

“Guess I forgot,” Travis said, “So how do you know so much about Beanola yourself?”

“Well, I’ve got the full history right here in my briefcase along with the evidence for OJ’s innocence.”

“Can I have a look?”

“No, it includes blood samples and some toxic chemicals that would kill you if I opened it. I’ve developed an immunity, but nobody else can see it unless we step inside the sterilized lab and suit up.”

“OK, whatever,” said Travis, “but can I see your tree?”

“Well, I don’t think...”

Travis stood up and started walking toward the mantle where Kaelin’s own tree was displayed. “Look!” he exclaimed with surprise after taking a close look, “it’s stapled just like mine!”

“Oh, yes, sorry,” Kaelin said, “I forgot to mention that in my letter.”

“So you knew that the trees you were giving out were fake?”

“Well, technically, yes, but they’re modelled after the real thing that I saw with my own eyes.”

“WHAT?”

“They’re exact replicas of the real thing, so technically they’re real, and so is the fruit,” Kaelin said, “Don’t you like jellybeans?”

“Sure, I guess.”

“Well, from where I stand, I see lots of people who find out the truth about their trees, and they keep right on eating the jellybeans. What makes you so special that you suddenly need all of this proof?”

“Uh...”

“They taste really good! Wouldn’t you agree?”

“OK, sure,” Travis conceded, “but the jellybeans weren’t even grown on these trees like the manual says. They must have been borrowed or stolen from a different source altogether. We’re not the only ones with jellybeans; in fact, I recently found out you can order some online and they’ll deliver for free – right to the front door!”

“You’re on thin ice,” Kaelin warned, “remember, the store-bought jellybeans aren’t real.”

“Neither are these!”

“Well, they’re counterfeit! Poisonous too!”

“Make up your mind!” Travis asked, losing his patience, “How would you know anyway? You’ve never even tried the ones from the store?”

“Of course not,” Kaelin replied, “Haven’t you read your manual? It says to make sure never to eat any other jellybeans once you’ve had a taste of the ones from your tree. The combination would ruin your taste buds if it doesn’t kill you first.”

“Well, I’ve got a confession to make,” Travis said proudly, “I ordered some the other day and ate a whole jarful. I’m just fine; in fact, I liked the store-bought jellybeans even better!”

“Well, if you’re not going to take my advice and stay off the internet, I can’t protect you. I have no choice now but to conclude that your taste buds are shot,” Kaelin said, “so I’m going to have to tell everyone not to trust your opinions anymore.”

Realizing his voice would be rendered meaningless to everyone who meant anything to him, Travis decided to concede, ask for Kaelin's forgiveness, and keep quiet. He dropped the fruitless discussion and went back home to think through his options. Over the next few weeks he tried doing what the manual suggested step by step, but found that he just couldn't keep it up.

The breaking point came when he stayed up late one night and discovered that Kaelin had hired a work force whose job was to buy jellybeans, stuff them into oranges, and go around gluing them to the Orenthites' trees while they slept.

The betrayal was too much for Travis, and he started questioning everything the Kaelin, Ted, and every other Orenthite had told him from the beginning. As the dominos toppled in his head, Travis found himself facing the now absolutely relevant revelation that materialized in an instant: OJ actually was responsible for the double homicide!

From the 911 calls to the Bronco chase to the distracting circus of the trial verdict, the whole sequence of events suddenly became clear. The staggering realization that a murderer had escaped justice was quickly followed by the overwhelming implications and the complicit guilt of his own false professions of OJ's innocence to everyone he had known. He had spent years of his life in OJ's defense, only to find himself pointing in the wrong direction; had it all been a wasted effort?

Travis had rarely left the compound since the day Ted had heard about the Orenthites and moved his young family in almost two decades before. It seemed like a scary proposition, but he knew it was time to leave. He wanted to tell everyone he knew about his epiphany, but he also knew that his conclusion was going to be meaningless to his friends and family; those who professed OJ's innocence based on feelings around the fictional character that had been concocted weren't going to allow themselves to take the briefest look at the evidence that had led him down this road.

As he packed up his possessions, he tried to fit everything he would need to start his new life into one box, beginning with a blank notebook that he intended to fill with his newfound insights. He threw all of his copies of *Kaelin's Kool Klothes* and the rest of his Orenthite mementos into in another box bound for the dumpster.

As he exited the compound with both boxes in hand, he passed some young new recruits entering the enclave. He wondered if he had any obligation to let them know about his own journey. Almost 30 years had elapsed since the trial of the century, and in the meantime, the members of this whole new generation of Orenthites weren't even old enough to remember the trial at all. It seemed ironic that they would soon be proclaiming their knowledge of OJ's innocence at the monthly meetings without any awareness of the crimes he had actually been charged with.

Travis felt a degree of sympathy for them, but at the same time also a measure of envy given that they would never learn enough about the case to ever question OJ's innocence. It seemed so much simpler when he was in that situation himself, but there was no going back now. Travis just shook his head and kept walking.

His first stop was the dumpster along the street. Try as he might, he just couldn't bring himself to throw out his box. Maybe Ted or his other family members would want them, he thought. He went back through the entrance to find a familiar face, but his club membership card was no longer valid. He was surprised to be promptly turned away by security who had already been notified about the unlikely dissenter. The security guard radioed to Kaelin, who quickly made his way to the entrance to bid farewell.

“No hard feelings, right?” Kaelin asked, “I mean you understand we can’t risk having you come back here spreading rumors and falsehoods among the new recruits, don’t you?”

Having come to recognize the textbook signs of cultism through his late-night Google binges, Travis let the word slip in front of Kaelin, who scoffed at the designation.

“It’s not a cult if it makes you feel good,” Kaelin said, pointing to a jar at the reception desk, “Have a jellybean!”

Travis dropped his paraphernalia box at Kaelin’s feet, grabbed a handful of orange jellybeans, and headed out the door for the last time. This was no longer his home. These were not his people.

Travis had finished all of the jellybeans by the time he walked the three blocks to Sunset Boulevard. Although he knew that the orange jellybeans weren’t as magical as Kaelin had claimed, he still found them pretty tasty all things considered. In the back of his mind, though, he had always wondered if there might be other flavors out there, perhaps some that he might like even better than the orange ones.

He didn’t know which way to turn down Sunset Boulevard, but he found the prospect of choosing for himself strangely liberating after the regimented life he had been accustomed to. As he made his choice, he was excited to find out what life might have in store for him down the road.

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A few years have now passed since Travis split ways with the Orenthites. He got into the landscaping business and seems to be coping just fine in his strange, new world. He never saw Kaelin again, but he still keeps in contact with Ted and his other family members. Ted likewise came to the conclusion that OJ is guilty and beansai trees are bogus, but he enjoys the jellybeans, the recitation meetings, and the gala too much to leave himself. Travis makes an annual pilgrimage from Socal to Norcal to visit the Jelly Belly factory. His favorite flavor is Tutti Frutti, which is a blend of every imaginable fruit flavor. Just the other day, Travis bought the Beanboozled game online just so he could cut out the box cover and hang it up on his wall to commemorate his exit and to make sure he is careful not to be “Bean Boozled” again in the future.

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So that’s the end of the parable. This whole story is obviously made up – and is so ridiculous that I can’t even say with a straight face that it’s based on a true story...which is actually how I feel about my own past these days. So where does this cockamamie tale come from? Here’s the reality:

My own son used to come home frustrated from fast and testimony meeting each month.

“They’re all saying they know these things are true,” he would say about the youth who had stood up to share their testimony, “but when you hear them talking between classes, I don’t think they really mean it.”

“Well, you can only answer for yourself,” I told him, “so if it bothers you, just make sure you only say what you really believe.”

“I think it’s like the crowds in the story of the Emperor’s new clothes,” he told me after one meeting that really annoyed him, “They say it because everyone else is saying it, but they don’t believe it themselves.”

“All you can go by is what you see and recognize for yourself,” I told him, “How can you ever know whether someone else sees what they say they see? You can’t call that into question, because they could say the same about you.”

I’m not sure if the message sank in for him, but I do want to live by that mantra myself. I’ve come to the conclusion that you can’t call someone else a hypocrite without being a hypocrite yourself, so I really don’t feel comfortable telling someone who see clothes that they’re wrong.

Even if you don’t see the clothes yourself, it doesn’t mean other people are lying. They see the clothes, because they want to see the clothes. His comments really got me thinking about my own convictions, and I tried to find an example in which different people in the crowd might legitimately see different things. That conversation is what sparked this chapter.

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This example certainly isn’t limited to Mormonism; we will all face situations in which we have to figure out how to navigate life when a believer sees the beautiful clothes, and a non-believer sees right through them. So let’s look back again at Buffy’s photo at the beginning of the chapter. Actually, the guy’s name is Keegan. He is a real guy who went to a real party where someone snapped a real photo of him with his real Smartphone for his real Instagram.

Is he wearing clothes? Looking at the photo as a small thumbnail, it may look like he was decked out in a fancy tuxedo. What if you had seen him yourself at this party, and the next day your friend told you, “Keegan wasn’t wearing any clothes at the party!”

You might disagree and say, “You’re wrong. I saw him from across the room, and I know full well that he was wearing clothes.”

Only you’d be the one who was wrong, because in this case, Keegan is wearing body paint. The tuxedo is just painted on. You might reject this truth and find yourself at an impasse with your friend; but if your vantage point makes clothes and body paint indiscernible from each other, you may wish to reconsider your conviction. Your friend only knows the secret because he had a closer look; if you wanted to know for yourself next time around, maybe you’d better get a bit closer. If you’d rather not know, that’s fine – and perfectly understandable if Keegan isn’t your type – but then you ought to stop claiming that you know what he was wearing!

Once you zoom in, though, the body paint becomes completely, glaringly obvious. The Emperor is naked, and I can’t unsee that. Now that you know the truth for yourself, you’re in the same boat. Don’t believe me? Try to look at his picture below and unsee his nipples. Then look him in the eye and repeat three times the words, “I love your tux, I know it’s true!” without catching the tell-tale signs of its absence with your peripheral vision. Try it! I dare you! I’ll bet you can’t, yet that’s what my former, fellow parishioners are asking me to do: to unsee the glaringly obvious, awkwardly revealing truth!



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Now this whole bean-boozled episode might sound bizarrely amusing, but the Mormon version of this tale includes an ongoing tragedy. I know I’ve already beaten the imperial imagery to death here, but let’s substitute Joseph Smith for Keegan, and the prophetic mantle for the tux; some see the fabric while others see right through it.

How can that difference in perception be tragic? Well, suppose someone who sees the prophetic mantle is married to someone who sees the signs of its absence; can they ever find common ground? What if the believer has been taught that non-believers will be locked out of heaven? And not just the non-believer, but any believer who is partnered up with a non-believer as well, dooming both of their souls? Now that might sound simplistically extreme, but it’s the well-documented doctrine of the LDS Church, and it’s a very real, toxic situation that thousands of



couples find themselves confronted with. Add to that a belief that looking too closely is wrong, and the non-believer will be stuck carrying the blame for having doomed the couple's eternal future by **decimating** their heavenly mansions.

They could decide to live their separate lives and maintain their individual philosophies, splitting up the kids based on each child's individual inclinations; that seems to be a very common approach for part-member or partially believing LDS couples. But is there a way out whereby they could reach some sort of agreement on how to spend their Sundays and raise their kids? Of course, there ought to be a pragmatic middle ground, but official church statements claim there is no such thing. So if they wish to navigate life together with any sort of unity, the believer could join the non-believer or vice versa, but which one should concede?

Say you put a couple in a room with two doors on opposite sides of the room and handcuff Harry and Sally together. Fireman Joe appears on the TV screen, dressed in his fireproof suit, and shouts that the building is on fire. Whether or not they agree, the pair is going to have to choose one door or the other to escape through. Fireman Joe says the door on the left is going to explode into a deadly backdraft if opened, while the door on the right leads to a posh resort.

"Now hurry up and get to the resort," he says, "and stay away from the TV screen!"

"Come on, let's go," Harry says, tugging at Sally.

Sally thinks the whole thing smells fishy. She starts pulling back at Harry as he heads for the door, trying to get a closer look at Fireman Joe.

"Why would he tell us to stay away from the screen?" she asks.

"Come on, we don't have time for that!" Harry responds, "Let's go!"

"Hang on, I can see his badge," Sally says, squinting her eyes "It says Marshall – from Paw Patrol. He just printed it off the internet and taped it to his suit!"

"Who cares, he's a fireman," Harry shouts, still facing the door and pulling Sally toward him "Besides, the kids love Paw Patrol."

"What does that have to do with anything, and how do you even know he's a real fireman?" Sally challenges, "It looks like he's wearing a costume from Target. I think he's just trying to sell us time shares to the resort."

"It looked real to me," Harry says, "Maybe he was in a rush getting ready and knew people would die if they scrutinized things too much; that must be why he told us not to look too closely."

"That doesn't make any..."

"Come on, we have to hurry!"

"But..."

"Listen, I *know* he's telling the truth," Harry says, sobbing and pulling Sally's handcuffed hand to his heart, "I feel it right here!"

So...which door should they choose if they truly respect each other's opinions? Now let's tie the kids up to the same chain gang and pose the question again. Harry wholeheartedly believes that the door on the left, which Sally actually prefers, will be fatal for the entire family.

Sally, on the other hand, believes that both doors are relatively safe, but that the door on the left is actually preferable, and the posh resort to the right comes with the obligation of sitting through a two-hour time-share seminar every week.

Harry claims to have an absolute knowledge that he is right. Sally doesn't think there's any way to really know anything from inside the room, but the fake badge and uniform seem like sure signs that there's a con going on and that there isn't even a fire in the building at all.

To spin it back into a Mormon story, by choosing the left door, Harry believes they would be giving up kingdoms, thrones, principalities, dominions, and even planets for not just themselves but their own posterity...and not just for their mortal kids but for spirit children numbering more than "the sands of the sea" who will instantly cease to exist if they take that exit. If he gives in and takes the door on the left, he believes his whole family will die a horrible, gruesome, painful death, "how sore you know not, how exquisite you know not, how hard to bear you know not."

For Sally to capitulate and choose the door on the right, she might have to sacrifice a couple of hours a week and recite a few phrases about how awesome the resort is in an attempt to convince their friends to buy time shares as well, but there's no burn unit or skin grafts involved.

Yes, this sounds ridiculous, but a no-middle-ground, exclusive religion essentially leaves its adherents with only these two doors, telling everyone they must choose the door on the right to escape their doom.

With this unbalanced weigh-in, it is understandable why so many non-believers pretend to see the same thing as the believers and spend the rest of their days reciting phrases they don't actually believe, proclaiming the beauty of the Emperor's clothes and the resiliency of his fire-proof suit.



So taking it back to Kaelin's Krazy Klub, should those who devote two full-time years trying to convert people to the "Mormenthite" movement be shown all of the evidence for and against their case before embarking on that effort? Should they be able to accept the selected evidence indicating the innocence of their role models and ignore any incriminating clues? Should they be told about the charges of sexual assault, racial discrimination, and hate crimes laid against their prophet heroes? What if a prospective emissary bases their belief on the principle that "I feel good when I think about his innocence; therefore, it proves his innocence." What if evidence is seen as something dangerous that shouldn't even be touched? And that they have been taught that the only evidence that hasn't been doctored is stored in the magic briefcase that will ultimately and conclusively prove innocence. If the conviction of a Mormenthite is based on those underlying principles, is it even worth stirring the pot by bringing it up? So far in my life, the answer has been no. I bite my tongue after having seen the fruitlessness of discussions that have started down that road.

While Kaelin's excuses and explanations in the story seem ridiculous, they actually feel more sensible to me than what I read from Mormon apologists about scriptural historicity and other

topics. There are few things more aggravating than watching someone who has been caught red-handed and naked trying to keep the story going with nonsensical excuses!

Like Travis, I just had to walk away quietly with nothing but a few jellybeans. Now I don't doubt the integrity and sincerity of those who prefer to keep a safe distance and continue to attest just how beautiful the Emperor's wardrobe is. But knowing that the term "clothing" had to be redefined to keep the parade going, it feels a bit funny to hear the believing observers talk about the bowtie and the cufflinks and the jacket's fit and other things that don't really make any sense in the now-admitted context of body paint.

That official concession is freely available to anyone who bothers to look, but why won't the officials who know the truth announce to the gala crowd that he's wearing nothing but latex? It still involves some impressive artistry. Maybe it's a fear that the spectators would stop coming. Or maybe it's because the books they have published have played up the value of real, authentic textile, and the spectators were told that the gala is the only place where they can see it for themselves. So they're told to leave their zoom lenses at home and stay behind the fence while the charade continues with whatever rationalization is required to keep it going.

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Priceless

I was fed a line that's similar Kaelin's admonitions: "Keep your distance and you'll see the beauty of his adornment," they said, "but if you choose to ignore the voice of warning, cross the tape, and get too close, it's bound to get ugly; in fact, we'll throw you out of the courtyard altogether!"

If you ignore the warnings coming down the Mormenthite chain and keep moving closer with your own disobedient, scrutinizing eyes, you'll see what they didn't want you to see...and find yourself facing a choice: you can pretend you didn't see it, you can choose to leave silently, or you can raise a stink about it and get yourself kicked out.

If you decide you'd rather stay, it's a tough gig to stay true to yourself. Realizing that some of those who claim to have interacted with resurrected beings in early LDS history claimed later they had been looking through their "spiritual eyes," I suppose I could take that same approach here and see a tuxedo that isn't really there. If I try squinting my eyes a bit, for example, and back away from the screen, I can easily pretend he's wearing real clothes because I see that tux with my own "spiritual eyes," too! But if you pulled the smoke alarm at the party and set off the sprinkler system, you'd see him standing there naked and realize that anyone who still clings to the belief in his fine clothes at that point is deceiving themselves...or choosing not to look.

As for the keepsakes on my bookshelf? It's as if my parents gave me and each of my siblings a hand-crafted, priceless treasure like the beansai tree. I'm not saying the gifts are worthless – they still hold some value and serve a given purpose. They just aren't what I was told they were, and I was told their value was due to their origin. Well, I checked mine and had it appraised. And I found out that my tree is a fake. I have no right to tell anyone else theirs is counterfeit; maybe my siblings were lucky enough to get the real thing. But should I feel obliged to tell them mine came from a fraudulent source? And should I recommend that they check their own stickers?

Maybe a fake *Made in Hong Kong* sticker was placed on my genuine tree by a devious, deceitful snake of a pawn broker who just wants me to sell it short. And maybe if I recheck it with a more qualified broker, or just take Mom and Dad's word for it, I'll be happy with my heirloom.

Sometimes I wish I could plug myself back into the Matrix where at least I still believed it was real and could cuddle up to my tree as a security blanket. But I've checked it and rechecked it myself; I've taken it to appraiser after appraiser to get second and third opinions. And the bottom line is that mine is clearly a fake; even without the appraisals, it just feels fake now. In a way this realization is a blessing, but it's also a curse, because nobody else seems to want to see the staples in their tree. And I guess in the end I can't blame them, because it's not a pretty sight at first. But as for myself, a trip to the Jelly Belly factory makes it worth it in the end, recognising that even though there's a Stinky Socks flavor mixed in here or there, at least there are more flavors to choose from than orange – including my favorite Tutti Fruttis that I never would have tasted if I had stayed on the compound!

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*OJ is innocent!*

If I compare my Mormon saga with the backdraft analogy above, I have gradually transitioned from Harry's role to Sally's, including a number of years in which I found myself looking at my watch in the timeshare salesroom, knowing I could only leave if I agreed about the awesomeness of the whole pyramid. So I found myself reciting things I didn't actually believe, always looking for wording that fell short of an outright lie. It's an awkwardly easy thing to do with enough mental gymnastics. Let's take a yes or no question, for example, like "Do you believe OJ is innocent?"

If your initial answer is *no*, let's see if we can change that to a *yes* in three paragraphs or less.

I, for one, believe that OJ committed the crimes he was accused of. But if I needed to profess his innocence, could I say those words and maintain my integrity? Yes, absolutely! If I had to pass a lie detector test with an affirmative response to that question in order keep my Mormenthite membership card and attend my sister's wedding, I believe I could do it.

Let's see how this might play out: If I define innocence as not having been proven guilty, then yes, I believe OJ is innocent. He was "not proven guilty" of the crime, at least not in the criminal trial. Under the law, aren't we Americans innocent until proven guilty? Our personal view of the actual guilt he should be feeling for the crime that most people now believe he actually committed doesn't matter for the legal statement; we can only rely on the consensus of the jury.

So in this instance, throwing aside the civil case, no, he was *not* proven guilty under the protocols of that system. Which means he is technically innocent, whether I believe it or not. So by limiting my context to an under-the-law interpretation, I could stand up in a recitation meeting and say with full conviction, "I believe OJ was innocent." Could I let my integrity off the hook with that technicality? Well, with that resolute phrase, I could at least pass the Mormenthite recommend interview with flying colors, keep the card in my wallet current, and continue my life with them...or alternatively, the growing indigestion associated with that process could prove to be too much for my gag reflex, in which case I might just blow my cover, take it to civil court, and post this essay online.

I am Kreylin the Mormenthite, OJ did it, and the Emperor has no clothes!

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"If the glove fits...would you call the Emperor's buff?"

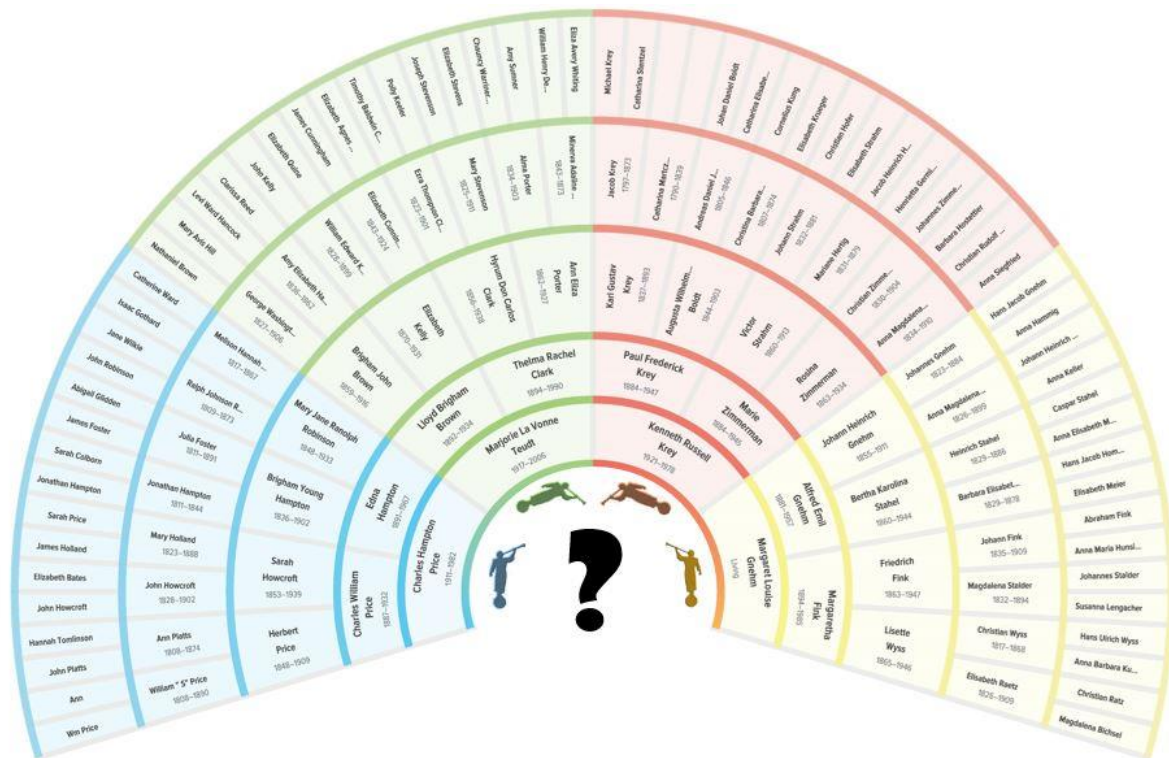
My Reality: Action-Redaction

“What should you leave out of the legacy that you leave?”

Family Fan

I was given three family names at birth; in addition to my last name, my first and middle names are also surnames – my first name being my mother’s maiden name, and my middle name being my great-grandmother’s maiden name. The tradition of naming children after ancestors or scriptural heroes is particularly strong among Mormons; the intention, in the words of Helaman, is that “when you remember your names...ye may remember their works...that they were good.”

I don’t know if that’s what motivated my parents to give me three last names, but I do know that each of my grandparents wanted to pass along the latter-day legacy to their children and grandchildren – an inheritance built around the good works of their faithful ancestors.



There is coding in my blood that has been passed down to me right through the Mormon pioneers, and their stories have been with me for as long as I can remember. As a family, we visited ancestral farms, homes, villages, churches, and workplaces in their old world, traveling to Switzerland, Poland, Germany, and other European destinations on our search. Back in the U.S., we discovered their gravestones in Nauvoo, found their names in the register of the Mormon Battalion museum, and visited the homesteads where they began their new lives as U.S. immigrants – and as newly converted Latter-Day Saints.

Some kids might complain about being dragged along on a family history tour; maybe I was a bit of an oddball, but I’ve actually been fascinated by the stories of my ancestry ever since I can remember. Along the way, I’ve also developed a tendency to dig a bit deeper to find the real story

about my ancestors' lives – even when those stories cover things they perhaps would have preferred to omit from the official transcript of their lives.

The records that have been passed along through the generations and that eventually came into my own hands are full of inspiring stories; some of the episodes can be quite amusing as well. We've got funny stories that have become part of our folklore on both sides of the family:

On my mom's side, for example, we have the *Italian in the Woodpile*, who would hide outside my grandfather's great grandmother's window on their Swiss farm, waiting for an opportunity to sneak in. Not surprisingly, it wasn't long before he became my grandfather's great-grandfather, much to the embarrassment of the family.

Would I wish to see that story redacted and sanitized to make my predecessors all look like puritans? As much as my Swiss ancestors would like to have swept the truth away at the time to avoid what they saw as a pollution of their gene pool, I certainly wouldn't want the account erased from our written history! Knowing this story, my cousins and I can all say we've got some Italian blood in us – and in some cases, that explains a lot!

I'm not sure how that account aligns with the mnemonic presented in the Book of Mormon, but when I think of my own name – which I share with my ancestors – I do think of their works...all of their works. And when I look at photos of the farm in our family album, I can't help but notice the woodpile next to the house...at which point it's hard to keep a straight face!



Switching to my dad's side, we've got the story of the nameless baby. As best as I can recall, here's how the story goes:

My grandfather's great grandfather, Jonathan Hampton, was converted to the LDS faith by Brigham Young in Canada. Jonathan and Brigham both travelled to Kirtland after Jonathan's baptism, where both became interested in a new convert named Julia Foster. Competing amongst themselves to ask for her hand in marriage, Jonathan won out; but when Brigham Young later found out that Jonathan and Julia were still deciding on a name for their new baby, he asked for the privilege of giving the baby a name and a blessing...and in his typically headstrong way, he bestowed the name of "*Brigham Young Hampton*" on my grandfather's grandfather.

While this is one of the only anecdotes that has commonly been passed down from generation to generation, in this case there is an easy opportunity to dig a whole lot deeper. This story and more – including Brigham Young's later marriage to my grandfather's grandmother, Julia Foster – are covered in Brigham Young Hampton's journal, which is an amazing, 40,000-word account of frontier life; thanks to Google, it is readily accessible to anyone on the planet with an internet connection.

Brigham Young Hampton is amazingly candid about his personal life in the journal; he freely describes his bickering wives, for example, and how simultaneously making three women happy proved to be an understandably impossible task. In the end, he could only hold on to one wife, the two divorces having occurred just in time for him to avoid being forced to choose between loyal wives or to go into hiding when polygamy was formally renounced by the church.

The story of his wife Mary Jane's ascension from the number three position to that of First Wife comes across as almost humorous in Brigham Young Hampton's journal, but some of the terse recitations leave the reader wondering if there is more to the story than his own words relate.

Mary Jane went through incredibly difficult trials in her life; during a diphtheria epidemic in 1870, for example, she tragically lost four of her five young children – two on the same day! She died while my grandfather, Hamp, was serving a mission in Germany, so he had to read about his grandmother's funeral service in a letter from his family. In the eulogy, as Hamp read in the letter, Mary Jane was portrayed as the noblest type of mother, having raised not only her own children but other mothers' children as well.

When I first read that letter myself as part of some research I was doing for a [book about my grandfather's life](#), I didn't give much thought to these other step-children – or to the ex-sister-wives who bore them. The only version of the story that I had seen came from my own bloodline, and in Brigham Young Hampton's journals he suggests that the step-children were abandoned by their biological mothers, and that's the end of the story.

Really? Well who were these other women, and why would they willingly give up their own children? Wives #1 and #2, Bertha and Helen Hampton, are part of my family too; so shouldn't their stories be told, and shouldn't their legacies be passed down right along with Brigham Young Hampton's?

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### Nitro

The LDS Church recently produced an amusing family history cartoon that encourages church members to research their family history. Although I don't think it was the point of the cartoon, the first part of that video brilliantly describes the next step of my own experience as I dug a little deeper into the lives of the two women whom Mary Jane replaced. Here's the clip that really nailed it for me:



As I read Bertha and Helen’s stories, I felt much like the guy with the nitro glycerine in the test tube. Honestly, if my computer’s webcam had been on when I found their words and read them through, I think the camera would have captured an expression exactly like the guy’s face in that last frame!

OK, all humor aside – and if you can pardon the Jaredite pun – this is the part where Shiz gets real:

Brigham Young Hampton’s first wife was Bertha King. He claims that she left him to care for their five children alone, but let’s have a look at Wife #2 for some deeper insights into this story:

A few years into his initially monogamous marriage to Bertha, Brigham Young Hampton – I’ll call him BYH going forward to avoid confusion with Brigham Young and Brigham Young Junior – began to expand his horizons. Knowing that he needed to comply with Joseph Smith’s vision of plural marriage to reach the highest rung of the ladder and gain entry to the Kingdom of God, he set his eyes on newly arrived Helen Bone, a 19-year old, Australian-born convert.

When she was just ten years old, growing up in the convict colony of Tasmania, Helen lost her mother and several of her siblings, presumably to illness. Her father decided to leave Van Diemen’s Land and brought what was left of his family back to his hometown in England, where he heard the message of the restoration – including the promise of eternal families. He decided to uproot again and join the Saints in Zion.

On arrival in Utah, Helen and her younger sister Mary Anne were quickly courted to fill the growing demand for plural wives.

[Now it doesn’t take a genius to realize that requiring faithful men to marry multiple women as an entry requirement for the pearly gates is unsustainable over time – unless, of course, you have an influx of overwhelmingly female converts or a growing number of lost boys or “unfaithful” single men! In that environment, it is no surprise that Helen and Mary Anne’s value as ladder rungs for ambitious brethren set off an immediate, underhanded bidding process.]



Helen bought into the authority of the church leaders but like many members of the church at the time, she found the idea of polygamy to be repulsive. When a man twelve years older than her with a wife and four children propositioned her with marriage, Helen wanted nothing to do with it. To coerce her into compliance with his demands, however, her suitor, Brigham Young Hampton, relentlessly threatened her with hellfire and damnation. First Wife Bertha also laid on the pressure; fearing for her own soul, Helen eventually consented.

“I’m the one who should be crying,” Bertha said to her when she saw Helen in tears on her wedding day, “I didn’t want you, and I despise polygamy.”

Based on her own experience after almost a decade of abuse, Bertha told her that any hopes of happiness and peace with BYH were false. Helen wondered whether God wanted her to humble herself and – in Abrahamic fashion – become willing to sacrifice her selfish, prudish, puritan ideals on the altar; but just hours after the wedding, she decided it was all too much to bear: she packed her things and left Salt Lake City, hoping to escape what she saw as a life of imprisonment. At some point, however, the eternal nature of her vows struck her, and she turned around – perhaps hoping to achieve some sort of redemption through her suffering.

Helen was devastated when their first baby was stillborn; eventually she bore two more children who survived their early years – yet faced a number of hardships along the way. All I know about First Wife Bertha from this time period is that at some point she also decided that she had had enough and left for Nevada. Helen was given Bertha’s five children to raise in addition to her own; in his journals, BYH makes it sound like Bertha abandoned her children voluntarily, but interviews with Bertha’s friends about the “whippings” she received – and Helen’s own experience over the next few years – certainly indicate otherwise!

Shortly after Bertha left, Helen gave birth to a fourth child; less than a week later, BYH took a new love interest, Miss Mary Jane Robinson, to the Grand Ball to celebrate the driving of the Golden Spike and the completion of the intercontinental railroad. At the next ball, BYH again chose Mary Jane over his wife as his date; by this time, however, Helen had recovered enough from childbirth – and from the death of the infant two weeks later – to storm into the ball and “make a squall” in front of the couple. Not surprisingly, when BYH married Mary Jane less than two months later with the blessing of the Presiding Bishopric of the church, it was done in secret from Helen.

Of course, Helen eventually found out about the marriage to Mary Jane. That revelation came in the form of BYH’s demand that she vacate the house that she had kept for over five years – along with all of her furniture and the items she had sewn as a seamstress – and to relinquish her two living children and her five step children to their new mother, Wife #3. BYH had planned to move Helen into a rented room down the street, but she refused and tried to stop him from entering the house. According to Helen’s testimony in a Bishop’s Court, BYH beat her savagely with his brass-capped cane for this defiance – and left her bleeding profusely on the doorstep.

After this episode, BYH cut off all temporal support, but Helen still refused to give up her children. As winter arrived, BYH laid an all-out siege that finally got her grovelling. Lacking any food stores for the winter – and after sawing up her fence posts for firewood – she sent one of her hungry children to beg BYH for some food and for some additional fuel to keep warm. The child came back with nothing but the imperative message to “Tell your mother to go to hell!”

With his temporal influence exhausted, and faced with Helen’s stubborn refusal to yield, BYH next turned to spiritual threats. When the standard threats began to lose their potency, he pulled out the ultimate card in the possession of any Mormon High Priest at the time: He told Helen

he would *leave her veiled*. Now that may not seem to be all that great of a threat to a modern reader, but back in Helen's day, it was a curse worse than death or hell; it meant perpetual limbo – an infernal disappearance into eternal non-existence.

In the custom of the day, a woman's temple veil was drawn over her face on her death; this veil was only to be lifted by her own husband to "resurrect her." The sinister part of this practice was that temple-endowed Mormon men had been told – or at least believed – that they had a choice in the matter...and that they could base their judgmental choice on the woman's fidelity and faithfulness – not just in terms of her adherence to Mormon principles, but subject to her lifelong obedience and submission to her husband's will.

Now you can argue all you want about whether this misguided notion was official doctrine at the time – plenty has been written on the subject, and apologists say that the sanctioned writings on the topic indicate that the husband could only act on the direction of Christ Himself in conducting this ordinance. But in practice, there is no arguing about the fact that manipulative men of the day used the phrase, "I won't resurrect you" to convince their wives that they had the power and authority to make that choice. And Helen, for one, took that intimidating curse absolutely seriously at the time – much as she laughed it off in her later years when she came to doubt the origins and authenticity of the LDS Church.

In the face of physical abuse and verbal threats, Helen decided to stand fast and keep her two children, in her eyes giving up her role as their mother in the next life in order to be a mother to them in the mortal life. Helen's conscience was constantly being torn between what she felt was God's will and what others were telling her was God's will. During this period of her life, she still placed a great deal of faith in the Bishop's courts, where well-meaning counselors tended to sympathize with her needs but failed to see their judgments for child support through. BYH and Helen were typically sent home from these court proceedings with recommendations to try harder to work things out through prayer and study, giving scriptural edits to "endure to the end" a whole new meaning!

While she managed to hold onto her own children, Bertha's children were eventually given to Mary Jane to raise while BYH continued to be sealed to other women. During these miserable years while she battled with conflicting loyalties, Helen discovered that her husband was involved in even darker secrets than the breach of his paternal obligations.

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Peepholes

On his arrival in Utah, BYH had been taken in as a son by his godfather, Brigham Young, who also appointed his mother Julia to be the matron of the Lion House after she became the 36th wife of the "Old Boss" as he was called back in the day. This connection gained BYH some influence among church officials and the leading men of Salt Lake City; he eventually became one of Brigham Young's personal bodyguards – a role that sprang from the personal confidence he had garnered from the self-proclaimed "dictator" of the Territory of Utah.

Given his marital issues over the years, BYH had also been dragged through enough courts to become very familiar with many local law enforcement officials. The men presiding over the secular courts had to deal with spiritual squabbles between their own wives, and BYH's manner of dealing with his wives wasn't necessarily viewed negatively; in some cases, he befriended the judges and

legislators who presided over him. With these connections in his pocket, he ended up joining the police force himself and was eventually appointed as the constable of Salt Lake City.

The territorial police force at the time comprised officers with a volatile concoction of church and state loyalties. Non-Mormon politicians of the day were sometimes unwilling to push the Church's agenda on Utah's legislation; in some cases they publicly denounced Brigham Young, who wanted these agitators removed from office. BYH's hatred of gentiles and "dirty apostates" was well known (and is well documented in his own journals), and this inclination – along with his influence in law enforcement – made him very useful to Brigham Young's strategic interests.

I'm sure the real story of the ambient environment in Utah in the 1860s lies somewhere in a middle ground between what is presented today in Church-sponsored Pioneer Day floats and the Taliban-style autocracy depicted in contemporary, non-Mormon news reports. In any case, BYH knew that according to Brigham Young's rhetoric, evil speaking of the Lord's anointed was a capital crime (as were theft, adultery, interracial marriage, and a number of other infractions and blasphemes).

We do have to remember that Federal troops had been mobilized to put down the Mormon rebellion at the time. Recognizing that most decent parents would be willing to fight to the death to save their own children; church leaders capitalized on that protective inclination, and the frequent repetition of one-sided accounts of the Mormon extermination from their prior settlements in the east was used to inspire the formation of a defensive force in Utah. Local militia members feared that the marching troops were under direct orders to crush their lifestyle, destroy their faith, rape their wives, and murder their children; so it is understandable that subversive and even offensive tactics were justified as appropriate measures of defense against this armed enemy. Speaking from the makeshift tabernacle on Temple Square, Brigham Young and his counselors found inflammatory rhetoric to be very useful in galvanizing the unity that would be required for the coming battle. Viewed through the Mormon lens, this was wartime!

In this environment, *non*-Mormon politicians were despised by the Saints as being complicit with the enemies of the LDS Church and were often pressured to leave the state, but *ex*-Mormon politicians were a heretical breed of their own. On par with Judas Iscariot, these anti-Christ's were beyond redemption. The Book of Mormon clearly places "Denial of the Spirit" as the Number 1 crime against God and humanity, well above cold-blooded murder or any other crime that an earth-bound soul could commit. In dealing with these traitors in his position of influence, BYH adopted this ranking system and applied what he saw as a higher code of conduct that lay well above the law of the land or even the secondary laws of God.

BYH's paternal obligations and wedding vows slid even further down the priority list in the face of his increasing responsibilities for defending the Kingdom of God in the Salt Lake Valley as the constable. He began to meet behind closed doors with other influential officers. Some of the clandestine meetings occurred in his own house, where Helen claims to have overheard plots in which BYH and other alleged member of the *Danites* – a vigilante group bent on retribution – planned the murders of several *ex*-Mormon politicians who were trying to draw people away from the church. Helen even claims to have foiled some of the murder plots by warning the targets not to go to the place of the planned executions.

Now many volumes have been written on the subject of the *Danites*, and I'm not about to claim that I have any concrete evidence that they even existed in Utah or that Brigham Young

ordered any of these hits directly; but the role of the church in the next sordid episode is well documented – and carries with it some insidious implications.

With his murder plots apparently foiled, BYH took another approach to blackmail his targets: He leased warehouses (Heber J. Grant's word, not mine!) from Brigham Young's estate and hired prostitutes to approach and seduce enemies of the Church – and then paid them extra to allow law enforcement officials to watch them in action through strategically placed peepholes in Church-owned buildings. [Perhaps unsurprisingly, the entire police force (with only two notable exceptions) volunteered for the service of acquiring eye witness accounts that could be used in the prosecution of the Church's enemies!] The charges generally had the intended effect on the targeted officials, resulting in either their conviction or their deportation from the state.



The Brigham Young Trust Company Building with the fourth floor outfitted as a brothel

The Church's goal in supporting this effort was to divert attention away from those pushing for anti-polygamy laws by exposing their own scandalous affairs; the diversion seems to have worked for a time, but once these rather embarrassing entrapments came to light – the court proceedings were part of the public record, after all – the eye witnesses had to admit their role in the sting. BYH's willingness to sit in prison as the silent scapegoat for the whole operation marked the end of the countering court case against the Church, but I don't see how that can exonerate those who paid him for this work – reportedly with laundered tithing funds! BYH claimed that his actions were done with the full knowledge of the board of directors of Brigham Young's trading company (including First Presidency member George Q. Cannon and notable apostles) but stopped short of pointing his finger directly at his godfather, Brigham Young.

Knowing what I have gathered about Brigham Young's Trumpesque character and leadership style, however, I simply can't fathom the notion that BYH devised, executed, and was paid for this notorious idea on his own with Brigham Young's complete ignorance. In any case, the records show financial ties between the brothels and the church coffers despite outright denials of any role in the scandal whatsoever. To me the Church's denial of involvement in the face of all indications to the contrary – including transaction reports for "services" rendered to the church by BYH and the

leading madams of Salt Lake – calls every subsequent denial of an official role in violent retributions and other sordid affairs into question.

BYH’s willingness to ignore moral and legal codes in order to protect the Church’s reputation is clear from the court transcripts of the day. Blatant bribery and frontier-style corruption was relatively commonplace at the time, and there are plenty of contemporary examples in which “lying for the Lord” under oath was considered to be perfectly acceptable by church leaders, who justified their actions with the belief that the court official administering the oath that they were breaking represented a government that sought to eradicate the defendants from existence – and was therefore an enemy that should be fought with clandestine subterfuge at any opportunity.

The Church’s bribery of government informants is perhaps understandable in this light, but when a corpse showed up in the Salt Lake City morgue with Masonic symbols carved into the skin – and the throat slit so deeply from ear to ear as to nearly decapitate the victim – the rules of engagement had apparently been thrown out entirely. Reading about the Coleman case makes me sick – and that sickness becomes even more revolting when I’m left wondering whether my own grandfather’s grandfather could have been guilty of planning or executing such a disturbing crime.

Helen accuses BYH of plotting the same type of “blood atonement” murders in accordance with Brigham Young’s very detailed edicts but does not indicate any knowledge that they were actually carried out. I do wonder how reliable Helen’s testimony is in this case; after all, it comes compiled with the writings of another scapegoat, John D. Lee, who was the only man executed for a role in the Mountain Meadows Massacre. Like Hampton, Lee claimed he was only following orders, but how high up the chain these orders went is still disputed to this day.

Helen’s testimony ended up as an appendix in later printings of Lee’s autobiography, which was unfortunately repackaged into an anti-Mormon tract, allowing faithful Saints to dismiss its entire content as diabolical falsehood. She had also joined the Ladies Anti-Polygamy League, which put her at further odds with church officials and in their eyes gave her a motive to concoct disparaging stories.

So I find myself stuck in a bit of a predicament on this issue. Was Helen’s testimony of the murder plots and of her own abuse indeed exaggerated by anti-Mormon and anti-Polygamist editors? I certainly don’t know the answer, and I would gladly let BYH have his own say in the matter, but this next chapter is where things really explode for me.

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### *Hearsay*

The problem with relying on BYH’s words is that if you search his journal for the time period covering Helen’s most violent abuse as well as the episodes aligning with the alleged murder plans, you will come up empty; you see, the four pages covering the period from 1867 to 1870 are missing from the journal. Were these pages just full of mundane entries that were accidentally lost? Or was this a deliberate redaction due to the potentially embarrassing content of the journal entries? While I accept both options as possibilities, my gut tells me to go with the latter, but that conclusion still leaves me with the question of whether the driving force behind the removal of these pages was to avoid staining the reputation of BYH as an individual, of the Hampton family name, or of the LDS Church?

Helen claims to have been a victim of abuse, but BYH plays the victim card as well in his own writings, asserting that Helen was a harlot who dishonoured him by running after other men. Maybe

she's right, maybe he's right, or maybe they're both right. At least now I've got two sides of the story. The records that were originally passed down to me included his account but excluded hers; I don't know if her testimony was deliberately excluded from our family history by my own ancestors, but now that I've tracked down her account, I surprisingly find that I'm missing a significant part of his!

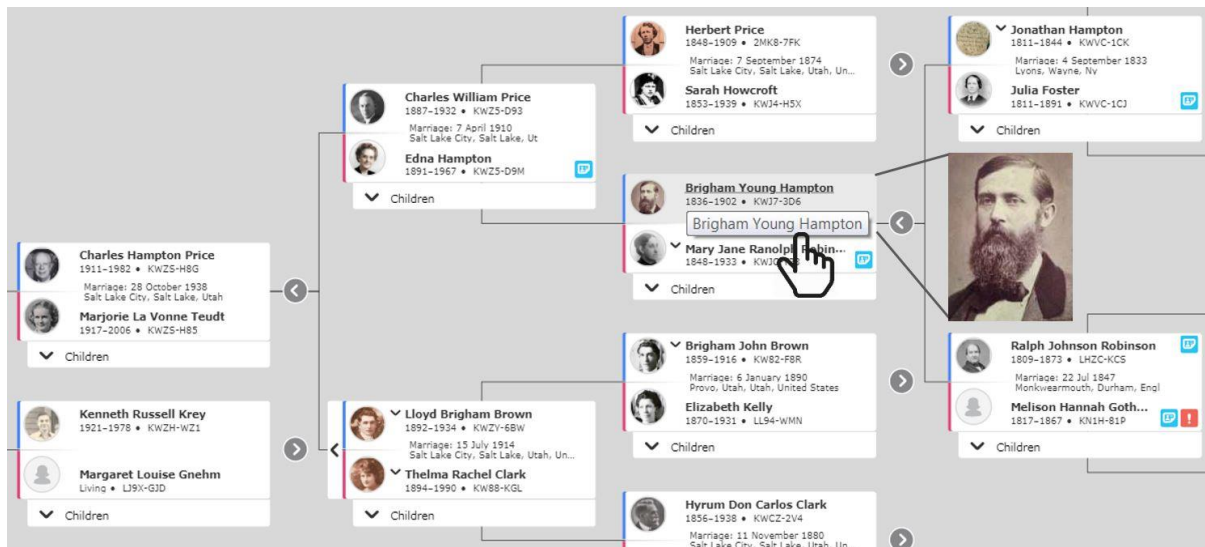
I don't see anything in Helen's testimony that gives me any reason to doubt its truth; her stories align seamlessly with other available records from the time and are corroborated by others. Witnesses claim to have seen the scars she bore from BYH's beatings, for example; were these self-inflicted wounds that were conveniently blamed on a pious husband by a jealous, deceitful wife with an aim to destroy him and his church? Possible? Remotely, I guess. Probable? You make the call!

In any case, I would like to break the cycle of deliberate redaction and historical manipulation right here and right now. The LDS Church has been plagued by a tendency to delete certain elements of history in an embarrassingly backfiring effort to, ironically, spare embarrassment; that tendency has at times propagated to individual histories as well. As much as I wish certain crimes like the Mountain Meadows Massacre had never occurred in the first place, I think there are lessons to be learned in all mistakes, and I believe that trying to erase them from the record just leads to further speculation and an increased possibility of a repetition of those mistakes. I don't know whose account is the more accurate between Helen's and BYH's, but until there's proof one way or another, I believe that both accounts deserve to be heard. And I, for one, will include both testimonies when I pass written accounts of my heritage on to my own children.

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Implications

So where does this little revelation leave me? I know full well that the buck didn't stop with BYH when he was indicted for his crimes; maybe he was just doing as he was told, or maybe he just went too far in implementing figurative statements from his leaders all on his own accord. In any case, I'm still left with conflicting accounts of what happened behind closed doors in his home. When I weigh out the split perspectives and try to put it all into context, however, I have to admit that I have a hard time dismissing Helen's version of the truth. As much as I'd like to hope that her reports of the hellfire threats and savage beatings were fictitious, I can't quite take that imaginative leap...and given my suspicion as to what actually occurred, when I see the photograph of Brigham Young Hampton in my own family tree, he invokes a whole new set of feelings in me. Whereas I was raised to honor my pioneer heritage as epitomized in the stoic images of my faithful, hard-working, plains-crossing ancestors, my first reaction is now to point at him and say, "You Bastard!"



I'm sure it's common for those researching their ancestry to discover inclinations and associations in their heritage that the researcher would prefer not to be associated with. If you were to find out that your ancestor was a Nazi or a slave owner or a KKK member, for example, it might feel a bit repulsive to imagine that person's DNA running through your own blood. But in my case, Helen's saga takes things even further; two parts of her story in particular trigger an explosion that, in turn, lights other fuses in a chain reaction that ends up blowing the whole powder keg!

#1 is the Church's denial of involvement in the prostitution scandal

#2 is the threats Helen received to pressure her into becoming a plural wife

The implications of #1 are clear. The Church's role in the prostitution scandal can now be proved, so what does the initial denial mean when you consider that there is a similar denial that the Church ordered my own ancestor, BYH, to murder ex-Mormons as is alleged by his ex-wife? Who should get the benefit of doubt given the blatant lies about the sex scandal? If church officials are willing to publicly deny something under oath that they wished to keep secret (much like Joseph Smith did in his speeches and newspaper articles about polygamy while practicing it covertly), where do you draw the line? If the reputation of the church is to be preserved at all costs, including at the price of your own integrity on cross examination in court, how much credence should be placed in the denials of affiliation with other scandalous practices? The only thing clear to me in this case is that I have no rationale whatsoever for drawing any sort of line around official statements issued by the public affairs department of the LDS Church. In this case, I'm left with a reliance on my own case-by-case, gut instinct rather than an automatic trust in a sanitized, party-line account issued by those with much on the line to lose.

As far as #2, this one took a little longer to sink in for me, but the reported threats against Helen appear to be symptomatic of a systematically sanctioned structure of abuse, the existence of which is similarly denied today. The denials exasperate me just the same considering the similarities of the threats that BYH used against Helen to the threats that Joseph Smith and Brigham Young both made against their own prospective wives, including both those who eventually consented to their advances as well as those who refused them. [It might be worth noting that the coercive demands are described much more openly in the journals of women who rejected the advances – and thus weren't under threat of being *eternally veiled* by their husbands for their evil speaking.]

Maybe BYH came up with these “eternal-death” threats all on his own; or maybe Helen just made them all up herself; or perhaps she copied her accusations from the journal entries of Joseph Smith’s and Brigham Young’s wives, who also made them up on their own. Far-fetched as it sounds, I guess that scenario is remotely possible with enough mental gymnastics. But if we’re talking about reasonable doubt? I’d say we’re well beyond that here!

To me it makes much more sense to stop super-stretching my neurons and recognize that BYH learned these manipulative tactics from his predecessors in the principle, including his very own godfather, who in turn learned it from his own mentor, Joseph Smith...who had learned that it was a very effective way to get girls to submit themselves to him – and to convince them to keep the relationships secret from First Wife Emma (or rather *First-Legal-and-22nd-Sealed-and-Only-Publicly-Acknowledged-Wife* Emma).

Whatever the source of these threats, this is where we get into the definition of consent, which is one of the main lessons in life that I want to pass along to my own daughters and sons. Some of the girls solicited by Joseph Smith to join his harem eventually consented to his demands, just as Helen did to BYH’s very similar stipulations. And some of them eventually had visions of their own in which angels or other spiritual witnesses told them it was all part of God’s plan, just as many modern-day fundamentalist wives claim to receive similar confirmation of polygamy’s divine purpose today.

But under that sort of pressure, are you really in any position to grant your consent?

We know full well that someone threatening physical death as an alternative to sex cannot legally or morally receive consent. If a victim has a knife to her throat and she says “OK, you win”, is that consent? She said OK, after all!

If you then look at a culture in which spiritual death is sincerely believed to be many orders of magnitude more serious than physical death, the sad truth is that the same devious outcome can be achieved under duress by using words as the only weapon. In that environment, if you have been deceived into believing that the person demanding your consent has the power to damn you to hell and then “disappear” you out of existence – and when that person threatens to do so if you don’t comply with his demands – can you in that instance really offer your true consent?

No?

Well if not, what do you call non-consensual sex?

Yes, that’s right, we have a four-letter word for the crime in the English language!

“Wait a second,” you may say, “You can’t go imposing today’s definition of consent on people who lived in the 1800s!”

Well, when the instigator claims to be in direct contact with the same eternal being that is worshipped by today’s believers, then yes, I’m afraid you can! Maybe other contemporaries can hide behind the guise of cultural conformance and historical context; but Joseph Smith claimed to be having regular conversations with a timeless God who granted him the right to tie a girl’s salvation to her submission – along with the convenient right to keep the demanded relationships secret from his lawful wife. In Fundamentalist style, Brigham Young then kept up the same pressure tactics and invoked the power of his priesthood to trade women as property, rewarding those men who were faithful to him with wives and bestowed blessing while stripping those who opposed him of their wives and families and condemning their souls to hell. This approach seems to have worked

extremely well for Church authorities; and from what I can tell, grandpa's grandpa learned these manipulative tactics from his leaders very, very effectively.

While you can't expect perfection from early LDS prophets, their claim to speak for God puts them in a unique category altogether; if they were correct about their assertion to be leading Christ's only earthly organization and acting on his behalf for the entire planet, you might at least expect decent, humane, Christlike treatment of others. Instead you get this!

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### *Characterization*

If you trace BYH's coercion to its source, you'll find yourself facing an angel with a drawn sword – and weighing out the believability or unbelievability of that predicament.

Now I obviously don't have any evidence for or against the appearance of the angel that Joseph Smith said threatened to destroy him if he didn't take more wives. To me, "the angel made me do it" sure sounds like a convenient way to get his wife off his back after having been caught in a relationship with his young housekeeper; but in these sorts of cases that can't possibly be decided on evidence, I feel the need to look a bit deeper into Joseph Smith's character traits and his other actions for which evidence *does* exist before deciding whether or not I can believe the truthfulness of his unprovable claims about angels – or at least whether or not I can accept that he himself believed in the truthfulness of his own angelic claims!

Before even starting down that track, though, does the angel really matter? Do I even need to have an opinion about the reality of that scene?

Well, having invested a good chunk of my life in the pursuit of Joseph Smith's vision, I'd say yes, by all means it does. You see, in the case of using spiritual compulsion on teenage brides, that angel is the only thing that separates Joseph Smith from Vernon "the Davidian" Koresh, Warren Jeffs, or any other predatory cult leader who has walked this earth. If that angel disintegrates into an imaginary figment, Joseph Smith descends into depravity – and those who sing praises to the man ought to add a verse each for Koresh and Jeffs along with a few more to cover Jimmy Jones, L. Ron Hubbard, Rajneesh, and any other scheming manipulator who comes to mind. So yes, to the millions of Mormons who stand true to their faith, the question of character – and the existence of the exonerating angel – is absolutely key!

Making assumptions around someone's actions based on trends and tendencies rather than direct evidence is a tenuous business; although it only provides indications, that's why character witnesses are called in court. Their testimony might not be enough for a conviction, but it can help frame the overall context of the complete picture. Even if we try to be non-judgmental ourselves, we still end up having to make these sorts of judgments all the time about people – for example, when we decide whose version of a story to tell our children, and which details to leave out.

Lacking any evidence for or against a personal appearance by an angel, I can only settle this issue for myself on the basis of character. An instrument in every Mormon's toolkit is supposed to be an ability to pray about a question and to use the direction of divine inspiration to discover the truth. I have to admit, I'm not blessed with the ability to base a decision about truth on those sorts of feelings. When all I have is positive, uplifting stories about Joseph Smith, it might feel good to think of him as a prophet – and to convince myself that I have received a spiritual confirmation of that belief. But one-sided portrayals paint portraits of fictional characters – not reality! And when I look at all of the available accounts, I'm faced with conflicting testimonies about his character;

regardless of the sincerity of my supplication, it just doesn't feel right to ignore the accounts of the young girls who were propositioned under devious pressures – and to call them outright liars!

Mormon missionaries are schooled to preach Moroni's promise to every potential convert right off the bat. After reading inspirational passages from the Book of Mormon, missionaries issue the challenge to:

“ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost.”

If that promise is used as the scale for weighing out whether an account of millions of people is factual or fictional, couldn't it also be applied to individual records such as Helen Hampton's?

I'd say yes, by all means! Using whatever standard of measure that you have at your disposal, go ahead and test her truth claims against everything you know and feel. If Moroni's promise is your measuring stick, why not apply it here? If you'll agree with that approach, I'll go ahead and issue that same challenge to every one of BYH's descendants using every cliché I can muster: I would exhort you to read Helen Hampton's testimony. And when you read these things, study them out in your heart and in your mind. Pray faithfully, sincerely, and with real intent. Ponderize her words from the dust if you will!

While you're at it, go ahead and apply the missionary-style challenge to decide ahead of time that you are going to follow that feeling through, whatever the cost. If you read her words and you're faced with what the Doctrine and Covenants calls a “stupor of thought”, well then you're off the hook. If, on the other hand, you feel a confirmation of their truth, aren't you obliged under the terms of Moroni's promise to go with your gut, reach a decision, and act on it? If you prayed with “real intent”, doesn't that mean having the actual *intention* to do something about it in the event of a positive answer?

What? That quickly? Without further evidence?

Yes, why not? Aren't investigators around the world being issued that same life-changing challenge every day – sometimes less than five minutes after having first cracked open the Book of Mormon?

If you receive a glowing, positive answer in the form of the proverbial *burning in the bosom* when you read Helen's testimony, then why not join her cause? She wanted to expose the systematic abuses that she witnessed and experienced. The least that my fellow descendants of BYH can do in this case is to let her speak by including her testimony when your family history files are passed along to your own posterity.

If feelings can be used to ascertain truth, well in this case, I feel the truth of Helen's words to the bone – much more strongly, in fact, than any impression that the promise itself was issued by an ancient Jewish-American-Indian with golden plates and a shovel. In fulfilment of Moroni's promise, I do get that burning in the bosom when I read Helen's testimony – along with it a burning rage that makes me want to tear down the foundations of any institution that promotes the sort of abuse that she endured! On the other hand, if that institution and those who adhere to its principles can begin to acknowledge and disavow abuse in any form – past or present – well at least that's a good start.

All sarcasm aside, whether you call it a spiritual confirmation, simple logic, or gut instinct, I happen to believe Helen's words. She believed polygamy was wrong. And if she is right, Joseph

Smith is wrong on the subject...which now puts him on the witness stand in the trial taking place in my own head.

The question for me reduces to this: Was Joseph Smith the type of character who would have made up a story about an angel in order to protect himself and his legacy? Or was he a man of integrity who reluctantly, faithfully, and humbly submitted himself to God's will in this case – in line with what I was raised to believe from Day 1? In order to answer that questions for myself, I'll need to look a bit closer for some clues.

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Infanticide

Now there is nothing funny about killing babies; I wouldn't dare make light of that sort of an image; in fact, it makes me uncomfortable to even put the word *kill* next to the word *baby* in print.

The image of a tiny casket should rightly evoke deep emotions in us. I get choked up reading about those babies who were overcome by the elements on the Pioneer Trail, for example. Combined with stories of their parents being chased from their homes by angry mobs, that imagery has long been used to motivate and inspire the Saints, sometimes for a good cause, and at other times – as in the violent allegations against BYH – to incite brutal retaliation.

It is hard enough to process the thought of a baby dying from illness or exposure like in the oft-recited tales set in the wintry Great Plains; but the image of a baby being killed in a deliberate, premeditated act stirs up a completely different spectrum of emotions.

When I toured an old naval warship in Portland about twenty years ago, I asked a volunteer diesel mechanic on the vessel a question, which he answered in a thick German accent. I then asked him about his hometown, and he dove straight into a story about how his hometown no longer exists. His original childhood home had been in a German village within the modern-day borders of Poland, but the German population was driven out by the advancing Russian troops as Hitler's Reich collapsed. He had been caught in a stream of refugees heading west that was backed up by the constriction created by one of the few remaining bridges over the Elbe River. He told me that in order to clear the bridge for their tanks and artillery, the Russian troops ran ahead of the column and pushed the refugees out of the way, shoving people over the edge of the bridge. The soldiers indiscriminately cleared the human traffic jam with the butts of their rifles, and this 80-year-old man teared up when he described baby carriages being tossed into the deep river with babies still in them. His heartbreak quickly transformed into a tirade against the filthy Russians who could commit such a barbaric act. This hatred had brewed inside of him from that day forward – all the way through the next forty years of Russian occupation, during which the very soldiers who had committed these atrocities lived in barracks down the street from him and crossed paths with him in the marketplace.

In today's world, how many of us will ever witness something as atrocious as the murder of a baby at point blank range? And without that sort of horrific imagery burned into our minds, can we really cast any judgment on this man for his hatred for the Russians? And what about the Russian soldiers whose hatred of the Germans had been galvanized over generations by propaganda about how the Kaiser's soldiers would allegedly toss Russian babies in the air and catch them on their bayonets? Whether or not that awful, awful scene ever happened in real life – that same anecdote has appeared on both sides of the front lines of several wars, after all – the design of retelling such a

brutal tale seems to be a desire to incite a spirit of revenge for such crimes within the hearts of morale-sapped troops or to inspire an uprising within an oppressed civilian population.

So if I don't even know whether or not the bayonet slayings are founded in truth, how dare I invoke that sort of imagery here? Yes, it's an absolutely horrible scene to imagine, yet most Christians freely share biblical accounts of widespread slaughters of a similar nature with their own children:

The darkest part of the Christmas story, for example, is depicted in the Coventry Carol, which portrays the Massacre of the Innocents and calls out its mastermind, the evil King Herod, by name in its lyrics. Much of the animosity that Christians feel toward this particular Herod – the father of Herod Antipas, who shared a role in Christ's condemnation – results from his role in this barbarity.

The lyrics of the song are absolutely heartbreaking; the words are a last lullaby that three women sing for their infant boys. With Herod's death squad drawing closer, they know their babies won't make it through the night, so they try to put them to sleep as peacefully as possible:

*Lully, lullay, thou little tiny child,
Bye bye, lully, lullay,
Thou little tiny child,
Bye bye, lully, lullay.*

*O sisters too how may we do,
For to preserve this day,
This poor youngling for whom we sing,
"Bye bye, lully, lullay"?*

*Herod the king in his raging,
Charged he hath this day,
His men of might in his own sight,
All young children to slay.*

*That woe is me, poor child, for thee,
And ever mourn and may,
For thy parting neither say nor sing,
"Bye bye, lully, lullay."*

Ever since the Middle Ages, the tragic song has been sung as part of a traditional Christmas play in Coventry. When the Coventry Cathedral was destroyed by German bombs just before Christmas in 1940, the city went into mourning along with all of Britain. On Christmas Day, the BBC broadcast its Christmas message – including the singing of the Coventry Carol – from the ruins of the burned out cathedral.



The rubble of Coventry

Along with men, women, and children, a number of babies had been burned and crushed in Coventry's rubble, including the cathedral that to this day has never been rebuilt. In the eyes of the British people, this was a Massacre of Innocents on par with Herod's; when the choir got to the words about Herod's rage, I imagine their own rage would have been incited against Hitler, whose name could easily have been substituted for Herod's in the lyrics of the song.

I'm sure the British soldiers who stormed the beaches of Normandy a few years later were still filled with that perhaps rightful rage. So where does all of this anger end? As a German citizen, did the old diesel mechanic I ran into in Portland – who couldn't forgive the Russian troops for their crime against innocence – share in the complicit guilt for the bombing of Coventry? Did he have a right to blame the Russians for the same sort of crimes that his own people had committed as aggressors? In the face of these unanswerable questions, one thing that is clear to me is the natural tendency to view those guilty of infanticide as the embodiment of absolute evil – and to seek justice and retribution for their crimes.

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### *Leap of faith*

I get a lump in my throat just reading the lyrics or hearing the melody of the Coventry Carol and imagining the terrible event that it depicts. Even though the scene is set over two thousand years ago, the thought of the baby boys in Bethlehem drifting off to their last sleep stirs up the same powerful emotions in me as the much more recent images of the baby carriages in the freezing Elbe or the smoldering tombs of Coventry.

But here's a question: Did Herod's massacre even happen? I had always assumed that it did – maybe just because I never considered the possibility that it didn't – but when you look for evidence or historical accounts of the slaughter, all you find is a single, third-hand account in one of the gospels, with absolutely no corroboration from the other gospels or from any other secular sources.

What if there were Herodites today who insisted on Herod's innocence – people who firmly believed that he did not commit infanticide? What if these people argued that the purported massacre sounds way too similar to Pharaoh's alleged cruelty thousands of years before? Given how useful the story of Pharaoh's evil edict had been over the millennia in galvanizing Hebrew unity against gentiles, wouldn't it be a convenient way to throw Herod under the same bus? It sure sounds like it could have been made up as some sort of oral tradition given the similar story lines; so do you think the Herodites might have a point?

Despite the almost unbelievable similarities in the two stories and the underwhelming evidence for the Herodian massacre, however, the story is almost universally believed among Christians and is still told in Christian Christmas services around the world. Any doubt is eradicated under the notion that the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, as described in a number of articles like [this one](#):

<https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/truth-or-fiction-did-herod-really-slaughter-baby-boys-in-bethlehem>

The arguments that are typically put forward in support of its occurrence focus on historical plausibility; the question then becomes not *whether* it happened, but whether it *could* have happened.

Proponents of the story argue that there's no proof nor any other indication that it did *not* happen (though you could say that about pretty much anything at all) so they tend to just accept the story as it appears in the Bible. Those who argue for the historicity of the biblical account can also say, "Just look at the terrible things that Herod is *known* to have done. He certainly *could* have and *would* have ordered the slaughter of those baby boys!"

I guess I would agree with that assumption; knowing what I do about Herod's recorded actions – including a propensity for murdering his own family members and committing widespread atrocities whenever his power was threatened, I believe that we *can* judge his character and make assumptions around his proclivity for certain malicious tendencies. And in that light, I am completely convinced that if Herod had been told of some sort of competition for his throne, he would have done everything in his power to eliminate that threat, regardless of the age of the potential usurpers.

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Evolution

So what does any of this ancient history have to do with my own ancestry? The incendiary details I keep running across in my own family history research extend right through to my own childhood and to the unravelling lines that I have been fed about Joseph Smith ever since I can remember. One by one over the decades, I have had to drop a previous view of his story and adopt a new interpretation. With that repeating process in mind, I'd like to know whether I should stop in my tracks at the LDS Church's latter-day version of the story, or whether I should take one more step off this precarious path and accept the plausibility of a single, third-hand accusation that disintegrates my former view of Joseph Smith entirely.

My problem here is that I have been sold a slippery story over the years concerning polygamy:

Story line #1 (10 years old): God gave Brigham Young special permission to temporarily allow polygamy because there were more women than men, and the women needed to be taken care of in order to make it across the freezing plains. As soon as that need was over, a manifesto was issued to officially end the practice. Polygamy was for the women's own temporal protection and didn't involve any of that icky sex stuff; Joseph Smith was monogamous, and anyone claiming otherwise has succumbed to the dark side of the force.

Story line #2 (15 years old): God also allows polygamy when His people are dying off because the surplus widows and single women couldn't otherwise have children. The pioneers found themselves in these circumstances and required "more seed," which was only provided by reluctant men submitting themselves to God's will. An angel visited Joseph Smith and told him that at some point in the distant future, polygamy might be ok in theory as a population booster, which unfortunately might also have to involve some of that increasingly interesting sex stuff, but Brother Joseph never practiced it himself. Anyone claiming otherwise has yielded to the Evil Emperor.

Story line #3 (20 years old): OK, there might be just a bit more to the story; after Joseph Smith received the revelation about polygamy that is in the Doctrine and Covenants, some women were symbolically and spiritually sealed to him, but he "turned it off" like a good missionary should and never had any of that bridle-your-passions-sex with them. Anyone claiming otherwise is two-timing as a Sith Lord.

Story line #4 (25 years old): Well, in fact, some of the spiritual marriages actually happened before the doctrine was officially canonized, but Joseph and Emma reluctantly prayed about it together and both received spiritual confirmation of its truth before it was ever practiced. God knew the gentiles weren't ready to hear about it yet and that the evil mob would drive them from the beautiful city of Nauvoo if the practice of spiritual wivery went public. This pearl was too sacred for the swine, so God told His prophet to keep it quiet...but Joseph never actually lied about it. Anyone claiming otherwise should count their midichlorians.

Story line #5 (30 years old): OK, some of the statements that Joseph Smith made in public might have been slightly untrue. But the public denials of the practice were in essence "lying for the Lord" for the preservation of His Church against the mobsters...so the deceit was fully justified and was, in fact, God's idea, not Joseph's! And, by the way, these were purely spiritual unions and not in the least sexual...except for maybe one or two, but these were isolated cases in which single women with no other prospects for the saving ordinance of marriage needed Joseph Smith to provide the obliging service with their full, age-of-majority consent. Besides, an angel told him to do it, and both Joseph and his new brides received an equally powerful, spiritual confirmation of the truthfulness of the principle. Anyone claiming otherwise...yep, drafted by the First Order.

Story line #6 (35 years old): Well, in fact, Joseph shared a bed with some younger girls who were still living with their parents...but Joseph struck a gentleman's deal with their fathers to make sure their families would be blessed for granting their permission. A few of the ceremonies *may* have been performed without Emma's knowledge, but as soon as she had humbled herself with sufficient spiritual growth, she was ready to accept the principle herself. These marriages were mostly symbolic and entirely consensual; anyone claiming they were sexual need only to look at the absolute lack of DNA evidence of any other progeny, which given the lack of reliable birth control in the day, proves that he wasn't in it for the sex. Anyone claiming otherwise...you get the idea!

Story line #7 (40 years old): OK, some of these women were still married to their husbands when they married Joseph Smith, so we need to expand our definitions and learn a new word called

polyandry. And some of the wives were taken away from their husbands, and some husbands were sent away on missions while their wives moved in with Joseph Smith. But these cases were very isolated, and the total number of Joseph Smith's wives wasn't in the hundreds as some have claimed; absolutely, positively, it was less than 50! Some of the girls might have been as young as 14, but that was perfectly normal back then. Anyone claiming otherwise is rebel scum...but wait a second, you're starting to lose me here – aren't those the good guys? Or are the good guys the ones saying that despite this twisted application of the practice, it still has a divine source? Ok, now we're pushing it. Seriously????!!!

Story line #8 (45 years old): Well, in fact, it was all about the sex to begin with, and some of that sex even resulted in pregnancies, but the pregnancies didn't result in further births because one of Joseph Smith's close associates was an abortionist who reportedly took care of a few inconvenient problems that might have otherwise caused reputational damage to the fledgling Church and its autocratic leader. Just like in Laban's day, it is better for one little soul to be lost than for the entire world to be deprived of the Kingdom of God and to slip back into the dark ages just because of one man's indiscretions. Anyone claiming otherwise...hang on, I guess this is where it ends, because the entire body of the LDS Church claims otherwise!

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The last of these eight evolving stories obviously crosses the official delineation of the front line – a line that has been in steady retreat my whole life but now stands temporarily teetering on a perilous perch somewhere between Story #7 and Story #8. In this case, I feel a bit like the fabled frog in the near-boiling water: I accepted the slowly inoculating history that I learned at each step along the way from Story #1 through Story #7 and hardly noticed the rising temperature; the substantiation of Story #8 would bring the water to a complete boil, and I believe an official acknowledgment of that story line would cause a whole lot of frogs to start jumping out of the water – at least those still in control of their faculties at that point. That said, I'm fully convinced that even in the absence of Story #8, if I had been presented with the scalding temperature of Story #7 without a 40-year acclimation process facilitated by each of the preceding admissions, I don't think I could ever have dipped my foot in the water in the first place – and I certainly could not have convinced myself that there was any sort of divine source for the doctrine and practice of polygamy in its Mormon incarnation!

Now by no means did this eye-opening process need to take me 40 years; even in the pre-Google era, I could have read all of this a long time ago if I had really done my homework. I had, in fact, read much of it when I was first handed anti-Mormon tracts as a teenager at church history sites – including citations of the alleged abortions taken from Fawn Brodie's 1945 biography of Joseph Smith. But I had been told by my own teachers and youth leaders not to trust those pernicious sources. When it comes to controversial topics, Mormons have been told repeatedly from the pulpit to seek their answers from the only reliable source – in this case the official publications of the LDS Church. Anything else should be dutifully cast aside as fake news – or in the remote chance of some sliver of truth, having at least been deceptively taken out of context.

Along those lines, LDS sources today may claim that the rumors that support Story #8 were devised by evil, cunning anti-Christians who wanted to destroy the Kingdom of God on this earth. Remember, though, that's what I was initially told about the "rumors" that preceded each subsequent acknowledgement of the ever-changing story. And the body of the church – at least those who bother to look – are now told by official sources that the first seven concessions had nothing to do with the devil's Evil Empire and that each one actually steered us closer and closer to



the whole truth after all. This, of course, suddenly leaves the 8<sup>th</sup> position dangling as the only one of the listed allegations that is aligned with angels of darkness; and I, for one, am left wondering who can be trusted to shed some light on the subject.

Not all of the false positions stated above were printed in official LDS materials; in my case, some of the denials of the real truth about Joseph Smith's polygamy came from leaders, teachers or other personal contacts who weren't comfortable admitting the embarrassing truth to their own non-Mormon friends and decided to water down the story with made-up excuses – and ultimately ended up sharing the incorrect justifications for Joseph Smith's behavior within Mormon circles as well. Accepting each increasingly loathsome tenet along the way seemed to make church members very uncomfortable – at least that was my impression in my own Sunday school classes – because the previous, sanitized version felt better. But the expanding revelations ultimately got swallowed and digested because a belief in the truth of the overall message seemed to trump both reason and morality – and in this case, both simultaneously!

So the evolving concessions of these story lines are not necessarily all that was available in the meetinghouse libraries but rather what I accepted as my inner belief and personal rationalisation at the time – with the full backing of the Mormon community around me. In any case, the fact that there was a gradually receding official stance is well documented, and I would guess that most pre-Internet Mormons of my age in the Church have been fed more than one of the erroneous justifications for polygamy over the years – and have unfortunately spread those same lies to investigators, seminary students, and even to our own children.

None of the revisionist accounts was ever freely admitted but was only condoned once “anti-Mormon” truth-seekers confronted the Church Historical Department with evidence that couldn't be refuted – and that couldn't be kept from the Googling eyes of young seminary students. I would certainly hope that we're now at the point of full disclosure and that the real, un-spun truth stops short of Story #8; in this case, I can rest that hope on the fact that I have seen no direct proof that Joseph Smith actually ordered any abortions – the accusations all seem to be based on a single, third-hand, unsubstantiated account.

I'm sure most of my Mormon friends would be appalled at the mere insinuation of Story #8; it is such an abhorrent thought that it doesn't even get acknowledged with an official denial. No doubt, any report of abortions performed under Joseph Smith's roof would be wholeheartedly and unequivocally decried by the LDS Church if the challenge arose, but one question I first have to ask myself is this: If any evidence for Story #8 happened to find itself into the hands of the LDS Church archives, would it be publicly acknowledged or would it be suppressed and locked away in a sealed vault? The fate of the Hofman forgeries and other embarrassments makes me doubt that such a find would be greeted with an open-door policy, so perhaps the absence of evidence in this case should be accompanied by some salinity. In the meantime, though, we're all stuck with no more than rumors as a basis. I hate to make an unfounded decision, but in this case, I assume I will go to the grave without any further evidence on the subject at all; so should we all just bury the story and dismiss it as hearsay?

My problem in simply rejecting Story #8 is that I trusted seven different versions of the truth from my own leaders and predecessors that each turned out to be more true than the last; and frankly, relying on that same source to guide my internal acceptance of the current party line just doesn't feel right. Shouldn't I leave my belief or non-belief in the matter to my own conscience, filling in the gaps in the evidence the same way I do with Herod's purported role in the Christmas

story – in which case I end up having to look at character traits and other proven actions for which evidence does exist in order to assess the scenario’s plausibility?

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Plausibility

Going back to the horrible war stories recited above, I’m now left wondering whether Joseph Smith was on par with the baby-killing soldiers directed by Pharaoh, Herod, Hitler, and Stalin. The thought alone makes me shudder, especially considering that I’ve spent a fair portion of my life singing praises to the man. An official denial of these transgressions wouldn’t necessarily mean much to me considering the ongoing denial of culpability in BYH’s prostitution sting and similar scandals; so in this case, I find myself having to draw and rationalize my own conclusion based on presumption, knowing that my final inclination is absolutely consequential in determining how I live out the second half of my life.

As mentioned at the beginning, we’ll never have any physical evidence for or against the reported appearance of the angel with the drawn sword, and we may similarly never have any absolute proof of the abortions that John Bennet reportedly performed under Joseph Smith’s direction. In this case, much like my opinion on the Massacre of the Innocents, my decision on where to stand will have to be based on whether or not the alleged perpetrator was the type of character who would respond to a threat in such an unscrupulous manner. In the case of Joseph Smith, my question boils down to whether he was the kind of person who would make up fake excuses to save his own skin. If the answer is no, then I’m comfortable dropping the implications of Story #8 based on his personal integrity. If the answer is yes, however, I’d at least feel the need to explore the validity of these accusations against him.

Here are three questions that my own reasoning follows, the first two of which are based on real events, and the last of which is perhaps hypothetical:

1. Q. How did Joseph Smith react when his role as a prophet and his reputation as a translator were being threatened, and indecipherable scrolls came into his possession?
A. He produced a made-up translation.
2. Q. How did he react when he was caught in an affair with his young housekeeper? A. He said an angel commanded it.
3. Q. How would he have reacted if one of his legally illegitimate sexual partners had turned up pregnant? Well, this one has at least two answers: A1. Fess up or A2. get his confidant to do what it takes to remove the problem.

The answer to Question #1 is not ambiguous. His translation of the Book of Abraham is made up. Supporters of its truth are stuck having to say that God wanted him to provide a made-up translation, or perhaps that the made-up translation actually came directly from God. But it’s made up in any case. Whether or not you consider it to be inspired, it is simply *not* a translation.

The angelic answer to Question #2 is also not ambiguous. We know that’s what he claimed, but the underlying motive behind the claim remains unknown. If you believe that a real messenger from the realms of glory would have commanded these secret unions under duress, essentially removing not just the woman’s consent from the equation, but Joseph’s true consent as well, feel free to stop reading right here, because nothing else I say is going to matter in the face of your conviction. As for me, even if I could make myself believe that Joseph indeed saw an angel with a drawn sword commanding him to abuse others, I would have to question under whose

command...and then let it be stated that a truly heroic man should have stood up and refused to comply, taking that sword right through the heart if that's what it took in order to protect those girls!

In the end, my inclination on this second fork in the road is guided by the answer to Question #1. As for me, I'm calling BS: Made up!

So when I'm faced with the potentially hypothetical scenario in Question #3, I'm taken down a road that scares the hell out of me to say the least. Some of these girls had been manipulated into non-consensual sexual relations under duress; that much is clear. If the alleged abortions indeed occurred, one might assume that the same level of duress would have been applied to see them through, in which case the victims wouldn't just be sacrificing their own bodies as they did with their marriages, but they would now be asked to sacrifice their unborn children as well in order to preserve the reputation of the Kingdom of God and its sole mouthpiece on earth. Perhaps we should take this one back to the same absolving compliance with God's will as in Question #2; after all, any real or imagined angel capable of forcing two non-consensual partners on each other would certainly not hesitate to draw that same sword on an in-utero infant!

The humorous accounts of Joseph Smith's attempts to produce an Egyptian grammar book and other oddities in Church history suddenly aren't so funny anymore when they start pointing toward the fallout from his increasingly consequential character flaws. If this sort of coercion actually happened, in my eyes the whole Mormon movement wouldn't just dissolve into a delusion or a hoax, it paints either the founder or the commanding angel as downright evil.

So in this case, I would absolutely love to believe the Church's portrayal of Joseph Smith's impeccable character. But these skewed depictions stem from the same media relations team that continues to deny events that I can read about directly in my own ancestors' journals. So perhaps a few reversals are in order if those at the helm of the church want me to start accepting their version of the truth. How about we stop calling Hor Abraham for starters! In the meantime, given the trajectory of my answers to Questions #1 and #2, to me any denial of my answer to Question #3 falls into the same category: Made up!

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*Davidian*

I guess I've always sensed that the origins of polygamy were messed up in some way; yet somehow I thought Joseph Smith could still be inspired by deity while doing rotten things. Mormon Sunday School lessons are full of "good tree=good fruit" and "bad tree=bad fruit" imagery as well as the reverse logic for discerning good from evil. I've never been able to see things with such a binary vision, but within Mormonism, when you think you've found a rotten piece of fruit, you're told that it can't actually be rotten to the core – and that you really need to focus on the other really delicious pieces of fruit. Only a good tree can produce a good piece of fruit, after all; the apparently rotten piece of fruit can't possibly indicate a bad tree, so its presence is ignored under the pretense of God's mysterious ways. Perhaps what you thought was a rotten piece of fruit just looks rotten when it's spun out of context. Or perhaps the glare of the sun got in your eyes or you were wearing sunglasses that only let you see the apparent mold "darkly". If you do think you saw it clearly, perhaps you should be looking at with more intent, or perhaps your own insincerity is to blame for the misperception. And if that all fails the test, there's always the chance that an evil imposter secretly put it there to try to trick you, in which case you can't blame the good tree!

To me, even the sanitized version of Mormon polygamy seems just plain rotten; but I have to admit that I previously excused Joseph Smith’s trespasses with an Old Testament-style, Davidian argument: If God spoke to David, the son of Jesse, after his complicit role in murder and adultery – and delivered Jesus Himself through that bloodline – then why couldn’t He speak to Joseph Smith after his own philandering and deliver a restored Gospel on the back of a similarly flawed character?

Could God really speak to a philanderer? The Bible is full of examples that would indicate so, but what about modern examples? When people like Brian Mitchell, Warren Jeffs, or David Koresh claim that God commanded their philandering, the general public rejects that notion because of their depraved, “bad-fruit” actions. As for myself, I’m trying to find definitions that condemn the actions of Mitchell, Jeffs, and Koresh, but exonerate Joseph Smith.

Calling a revered prophet a rapist might be shocking and offensive to followers, so I’ll leave the selection of an alternative term open-ended and list a simple line of reasoning that again follows three basic questions and allows everyone to insert their own preferred term:

1. Q. What do you call non-consensual sex?  
A. \_ \_ \_ \_
2. Q. What do you call the perpetrator of non-consensual sex?  
A. \_ \_ \_ \_ \_
3. Q: Did the alleged perpetrator have the sexual partner’s consent?  
A. Y E S or N O

Well there you go. Whatever term you choose to fill in the blanks with, the label is tied to the definition of consent. And if you accept the fact that the men in question here claimed a position of authority over their victims, I believe the women they took advantage of were in no position to grant their true consent. If the answer to Question #3 is “Yes,” the preceding labels don’t apply. You are free to go! If the answer is “No,” however, the selected labels stick – whatever they may be!

If you agree that at least some of the girls propositioned by Joseph Smith could not have granted true consent under the threats they received from him, that would make Joseph Smith a **Perpetrator Of Non-Consensual Sex**. I don’t know if calling him a P.O.N.C.S. is any less offensive than calling him a rapist, but I’ll insert the bracketed euphemism here to provide the reader with the opportunity for some perhaps less offensive interjections. If you claim that he was not a [PONCS], you’ll have to claim that he had the consent of every single one of his targets – in which case you can answer Question #3 with a resounding “Yes!” and comfortably throw out the non-applicable terms above it.

Really? The associated threats of eternal harm in the face of non-compliance are well documented. Do you really believe that Joseph Smith’s plural brides “consented” to those advances? If you say yes, I’d ask you to then seek out Elizabeth Smart while she’s on her way to her next interview with Oprah. Stop her in the street, look her in the face, and call her a liar. “You said you were raped!” you could shout at her, “That isn’t true, because you *consented* to sex with that man!”

In Elizabeth Smart’s case, it most certainly was rape. She is the victim, plain and simple; and the fanatical, diabolical culprit is clearly a rapist. So why should Joseph Smith get a break?

Of the roughly 100 brides shared by the first two LDS prophets (and in some cases, I do mean *shared*), how many cases of non-consent does it take to make either one of them a [PONCS]? One! So even if 99 of 100 cases were entirely consensual, we would find ourselves stuck with a [PONCS] at the head of the LDS church. If we’re going to exonerate them, wouldn’t we have to

exonerate Brian Mitchell as well, given that his advances and threats were so much less malignant than those issued by the early Mormon prophets? If you think Brian Mitchell's threats of physical death to his victim and her family are more serious than the Mormon prophets' threats of spiritual death for their victims and their families, you may need to have a closer look at Mormon culture and doctrine, which completely deemphasizes benign physical consequences in an eternal perspective.

To a Mormon who believes that their prophet possesses the divine "sealing power," which is defined as the ability to bind God's will with their own promises, spiritual condemnation is a fate far worse than having a knife held to your mortal neck. [The loophole, of course, is that the mortal prophet is not actually invoking his own will – he just happens to know God so well, and is so intimately familiar with his will, that his proclamations, threats and promises are in fact only recitations of exactly what God Himself would have said under the circumstances!] In that light, prophetic threats of spiritual death in the face of non-compliance, and prophetic promises of tremendous spiritual rewards in the face of submission – not just for the girl in question but for her whole family for generations before her and for generations to come – supercede any material threat or reward for true believers of Mormonism.

And that's why I say that Joseph Smith was a [PONCS]. And Brigham Young was a [PONCS]. And my own grandfather's grandfather was a [PONCS], with a young Australian named Helen Hampton as one of his victims – a victim who was cast out and discarded and erased from my own family history for speaking up for herself. I, for one, think that she has been silenced long enough – let her speak!



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Tirade

In trying to land on a verdict not just for Joseph Smith's actions but also for his intentions, I have to ask myself whether I believe that he made up the story about the angel or whether he

actually thought he was being threatened by a real, divine messenger. If there is such a thing at all, I am thoroughly convinced that no angel of God would demand rape, or non-consensual sex, or whatever you wish to call it; but in my eyes Joseph Smith's belief or non-belief in this manipulative message can put his subsequent actions in seeking surplus wives anywhere on the spectrum between delusional philandering and outright treachery. When the needle passes deliberate deceit and points toward utter evil, my wandering thoughts can keep right on marching – eventually landing on the plausibility that Joseph Smith may have committed unspeakable crimes to save his own skin, including coercing his plural wives into having abortions. And if that occurred, his wives would most certainly have been sworn to secrecy surrounding the matter, sealed by the same threats of hellfire that convinced his victims to engage in the relationship in the first place.

That damning scenario would completely transform my entire outlook of a man whose life I have studied since childhood – and whose gradually revealed faults I had previously managed to accept like a slow inoculation. But I have no immunity against this particular flesh-eating virus; if I did come to the conclusion that these abortions occurred under his coercion, the pedestal would certainly crumble; in fact I would kick it right out from under him if I could!

That synopsis would shed a whole different light on the faith-promoting, ancestral stories that are woven through so many generations of my family tree. Now I hate to preface the following little tirade with a disclaimer, but I know that this final part of my family history journey is going to come across as offensive to those who buy into Joseph Smith's divine mission. So here is my disclaimer: What follows below is not a balanced conclusion but just one of the temporary shocks that my soul gets while the pendulum swings back and forth. This is not necessarily my permanent position but rather where my mind takes me when I follow one of the more sinister trajectories to its ultimate destination. That said, here is a passing revelation that I see with my "spiritual eyes" if you will:

If his own megalomaniacal vision was in any way correct, upon my death I will not just encounter Joseph Smith standing by the wayside, but I'll actually find him guarding the gates of heaven! If that ends up being the case, I'd expect to see a choir of Mormons singing him praises as they did in this life, begging him for permission to enter through the gates...and perhaps scared to the bone of his condescending disapproval if they fell short in adhering to his restored checklists for salvation.

As for myself, if a tunnel of light brings me face to face with Joseph Smith as a gatekeeper, and if these accusations about his cold-hearted deception are true, I'd first need to shake off my surprise that a divine being would have granted him any measure of authority to judge a single soul's worthiness. Then I'd look at him quizzically, realizing that he is standing between me and the embrace of the loving God I hoped beyond hope to see in his place.

Then, once I recover from my disbelief, instead of singing him praises I'd look him square in the eye...and then I'd punch him in the face and say, "You Bastard!"

"This one is for Helen and Bertha Hampton and the abuse they suffered under the pretense of polygamy!"

"This one is for my grandfather who spent his whole life disappointed that his own father decided not to adhere to your made-up rules, believing that they would be eternally separated as a result!"

“This one, square in the jaw, is for his great-grandfather, Jonathan, who lost his life – and his son’s – guarding made-up secrets and following misguided orders!

And if my hand is sore at this point, maybe I’ll step back and contrast that scenario with my own vision of how I would have expected his prophesied, executive role to be reversed:

In my own equally absurd, but perhaps more palatable and plausible dream, I see a massive crowd at heaven’s gate; right next to the grand entrance is a jury box filled with fundamentalist lost boys and abused girls. And I would expect that Joseph would have to stand there on trial and answer to a long line of accusers before God while He alone – not me or you or them or any person at all – gets to be the gatekeeper in deciding Joseph’s fate.

Taking it further in the unfolding scene in my head, I would picture someone like Clayne Jeffs – who committed suicide after suffering unspeakable abuse in rooms with Joseph Smith’s portrait reigning on the walls – reading the charges. Maybe we could also hear a few words from Brenda Lafferty, whose infant daughter Erica was robbed of a chance at life, her throat having been slit by those implementing the sordid steps of retribution that were passed directly through to Joseph’s successors.

Maybe in all fairness Joseph can have his own defense attorney who questions whether he should be blamed for crimes in which evil people latched onto an evil principle to fulfil their own evil desires, shielding their abusive practices in the myth of divine approval. Perhaps God as the final judge would grant him some measure of absolution in that light; but if the crime spree was set into motion by a self-obsessed narcissist who couldn’t stand getting caught himself, I assume some measure of responsibility would stick through to sentencing. In any case, once all of the charges have been read, I’d perhaps like to see Clayne’s aptly named son, Justice, help carry out whatever sentence has been earned.

Now I might want to see Joseph get a few more punches from people like Jennifer Hoffman, who mourns her son’s loss every day, not knowing that the mental illness that possessed her son’s killer was brought about by adherence to Joseph Smith’s delusions. But as I consider her trials, I realize that I need to review my own life, which then takes me to the painful point of self-incrimination. This is the hard part where I’m put on trial myself and have to acknowledge that her son’s shooter radicalized ideas that he learned from teachers just like me. So perhaps I can’t judge at all – and perhaps I might end up with a sore jaw too, since I deserve to stand there and take punches not just from Jennifer but from my own wife and children as well for the bull-headed, autocratic way in which I implemented Joseph’s teachings in our own family life over the years.

I realize full well that I also owe additional apologies to many others for casting judgment through a lens of hypocrisy, deciding for myself whose superior digestive systems were capable of processing “advanced history” as it has been called, and from whom the “meat” should be withheld until the “milk” could be fully digested. All I can say for myself at this point is that I am deeply sorry. And armed with the wider perspective accompanying that introspection, if I do someday find that Joseph is the gatekeeper for those knock-knock-knocking on heaven’s door, I’ll go ahead and try to find myself another entrance...or maybe just turn my back on the whole party. Because I want no part of the misogyny, violence, coercion, racism, or deceit that I would expect to find behind any gate that he is guarding.

As I mentioned above, I've included this little rant here not because it reflects how I feel all the time, but as an attempt to show that the underlying motives behind the legacy of Mormonism's formation can have some very consequential implications, depending how you view them. And while I believe that deep down inside the structure of the church there are some toxic elements that need correction, in the meantime, I back off from this stance and smile when my friends and family baptize their kids into the organisation, tell them half the story, send them out into the world to distribute books with racist undertones and admitted mistranslations, and congratulate them when they graduate from the "Lord's University" that happens to bear the name of a [PONCS]. That might sound two-faced or hypocritical, but I do understand that one of life's great privileges is the chance to interact with those whose beliefs differ from our own; I could be wrong about my own views, after all, so my face-to-face silence is merely an effort to adopt a "live and let live" attitude of not just genuine tolerance, but true acceptance of the validity of their perspective.

Now to bring this particular rant to a close, I realize that it might sound offensive to call a Mormon prophet a [PONCS], but keep in mind that Joseph Smith himself said it was actually the angel who was the [PONCS], which could potentially be viewed as an even more offensive accusation than the one I'm making here. If you disagree with my line of reasoning, let's go back to the visual of a court case. Picture yourself on the jury of a case where an attacker has been caught holding a knife to a woman's throat and demanding sex. Initially it sounds like a clear-cut case, but what if in this instance it is complicated by the fact that the attacker himself had a knife to his own throat, held by another individual who demanded that the act take place? In my eyes, the third party is now guilty of not one, but two cases of rape. Now you could potentially argue that the threatened man should have tried harder to protect the woman, perhaps even offering up his own life to save her, but am I wrong in casting the primary guilty verdict on the ultimate instigator? And what if that third party, in turn, was merely in the service of a boss to whom he had sworn his allegiance, and he was just following orders? Could you then pin the whole thing on the boss? Or could the guilt be equally split between the boss and his henchman?

Whoever ends up with the blame, a crime was committed in this case, so shouldn't someone be held responsible in the end? The only other way out of this one is to claim that it wasn't a crime at all. Really? How could that be? It seems so obvious that there was, in fact, a crime, but if you'll work with me here, maybe we can find a loophole:

The only way I can possibly imagine steering things out of court altogether is to claim that the ultimate compliance with the demands – though perhaps initially under the appearance of a threat – was eventually consensual before the act was consummated. Apologist views of Mormon polygamy actually take that approach, whitewashing the whole scene in a bath of peace and light that filled everyone's souls before any sex act took place. Reading my own relatives' words about how deeply they were repulsed by the notion of a polygamous marriage to a man claiming to have the power to damn their souls, however, and discovering how much they abhorred the principle right up through their wedding nights and beyond, I for one can't make a case for consent. And if you agree that it was non-consensual, then a crime has been committed. And when Joseph Smith finds any finger pointing in his direction, he effectively redirects the accusation and points his finger directly to his own God as the [PONCS]. Well, I'm sorry, that's not my God!

So how do I go around justifying my smile and my silence when Mormons go about their business? I guess I'm back to a Davidian argument. Can I adhere to or at least respect something that a [PONCS] promoted? Well, do I respect the beliefs of Jews who have died for their religion while still believing that David should have been locked up for his crimes? Sure, their temples and synagogues and rituals can still hold beauty! Do I feel that their belief system should be dismantled in its entirety

due to David's weakness? Perhaps not, but should we white-wash David's transgressions and redact them from the record in the process of defending the faith? Should we rip those pages from the Bible just like the pages of BYH's journals were ripped out of his? Absolutely not! David's story is as relevant to the lessons of the Bible as the stories of the more pious prophets or saints. Let us learn from it! Let it be told!

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### *Journalism*

Thanks to a Book of Mormon edict that has been etched into the psyche of well-meaning adherents throughout the church's history, Mormons believe their maker will someday ask them to "bring forth the record which ye have kept," and that any missing content will be met with the question, "How be it that ye have not written this thing?"



Jesus making sure native Americans did not redact their records

The resulting propensity for record-keeping has ensured that even potentially embarrassing disclosures are preserved for future generations to scrutinize; in the face of changing doctrines and practices, personal journals bypass official channels and can require some very awkward rationalizations from apologists. It's not surprising that today's LDS apostles cede their personal records to the church, ensuring that they can be harmonized prior to publication. Thanks to a thorough dose of redaction, some records – like the missing pages of BYH's journal – may never see the light of day; despite those efforts, however, thanks to the explosion of the internet, some secrets that were kept in supposedly private diaries are getting harder and harder to keep.



Encouragement to record your experiences, thoughts, and feelings in the LDS Youth Magazine

In the case of BYH, it appears that the contents of the missing pages were so embarrassing or incriminatory that a higher law superceding the edict given to Nephi the Third was summoned, allowing an abridgment of the record that he kept. If the missing pages are ever found, I would hope the omission turns out to have been an inadvertent misplacement, and that the contents show instances of kindness and the traits that we like to admire in people. If they do, wouldn't we proclaim his deeds from the rooftops and view his life as a positive example that inspires us to try to emulate those qualities? But if they don't, does that mean we should bury them again? Or should we rather use the bad example to learn our own lessons for good?

My grandfather's journals that are stored in BYU's archives are likewise full of blacked out redactions. Who went to this effort, and whom were they trying to spare from embarrassment? Whoever went through that effort claimed the right to know the information themselves, but to withhold it from others. Shouldn't history be an open book? For adherents to Christianity, doesn't the Bible challenge its readers to "prove ALL things?"



A sample of my grandfather's records in cold storage at the BYU library

I do understand that personal accounts are not always accurate; BYH claimed in his journal, for example, that his father Jonathan died protecting Joseph Smith. That's the faith-promoting story I had always heard from my own parents; but when you look at the dates, Jonathan died six months after Joseph Smith's death. I would assume that there is something to the story; maybe Jonathan died later from injuries originally sustained on the job or maybe he died protecting Joseph Smith's *legacy*...and over time the last word was dropped from the story. Whatever the case, I'm fully aware that just because something is stated in someone's journal doesn't necessarily make it the truth – but it's a good place to start looking!

Now let's suppose that BYH was complicit in executing Brigham Young's vision of retribution on non-believers and dissenters in literal fashion as Helen claimed in her own writings. Would the knowledge of those actions now, in today's world, be considered a good thing or a bad thing? To me, a truth that occurred in a previous century can no longer be considered to be inherently good or bad. It might seem good or bad for the image of an organisation or a family name, or perhaps we might agree that a particular act was morally repugnant at the time that it was committed, but our presence and our very existence today requires that event to have occurred, so if it happened, let's tell it like it happened! The "goodness" or "badness" of a historical event is irrelevant; let's just look at history objectively and try to learn something from the context!

As for myself, I have done some things in my life that were perhaps admirable and some things that were downright despicable. My own journals are full of that proof. Maybe I reject the notion of Joseph Smith's impeccable record because of the dichotomous nature of my own virtues and vices, faults and flaws. But in the end, that's the only lens I have through which to view the world. And with that lens in one hand and a mirror in the other, I do recognize some positive things that I have done in my life that I hope have benefited others. But I know I've also been an absolute @\$\$hole at times [feel free to substitute your own synonym for sphincter if you'd prefer a less

offensive term]. Maybe you know somebody who has never been an @\$shole. Ever. But I suspect at times all men are @\$sholes, even those who claim, “Not me!” And perhaps especially those who claim, “Not me!” I would suspect this applies even to Joseph Smith and to my predecessors. And perhaps especially to Joseph Smith and my predecessors!

I tend to keep everything with a personal inscription, including every hand-written letter that has ever been sent to me. When my kids open the box with letters from my ex-girlfriends, they will see some written proof that I was an @\$shole. Should I burn those letters? I know full well that they’re not going to find an Italiana in the woodpile or any scandal of that nature, but those letters are going to show that I’ve been guilty of far worse infractions, such as pride, intolerance or other crimes against humanity. On a number of occasions, for example, the letters prove that I was guilty of drawing a break-up out into a dreadfully long process, exhibiting a whole lot of dishonesty, deceit, and hypocrisy in the process. In my eyes today, that makes me an @\$shole. Could my kids learn something from that? Could those letters help them learn that it’s best to fess up when you’ve lost interest in someone instead of denying the truth and pretending to be a good guy who is looking out for someone else’s feelings – while in reality trampling all over them and then venting about it privately in a journal? Will my own mistakes help them learn how to be happy being their imperfect, true selves? Or will they learn to live a dichotomous life just like I learned to “turn off” my own feelings and doubts and inclinations for the supposed greater good – like I did as a missionary and as a Sunday school teacher...and as a really lame boyfriend?

The natural man is an enemy of God, after all, and must be suppressed and bridled according to the lessons I was taught. So if I wasn’t attracted to a BYU relief society president who ticked all the boxes and would have made my family proud, should I have pretended to be? Although I’ve always been heterosexual, perhaps there are some parallels to homosexual members of the church in this case: I wasn’t attracted to what they told me I should be attracted to. And I felt guilty for it. And I thought if I stuck with it long enough, my answer from God would come, and He would burn that conviction of the “rightness” of this particular partner or that one into my soul. And I waited. And waited. And kept asking. And I figured my own flawed intent prevented an answer that I didn’t actually want to get. I can see today that I was completely narcissistic and delusional with that expectation; and perhaps deep down inside I realized that given my own doubts about the origins of the church I had no business trying to pretend I was “all in” and marrying someone who could profess their unquestioning knowledge of its absolute truth. These are some of the struggles that are documented in my journals and in some very painful letters. Should they be cast into the fire so I can rewrite my own history?

Given the insights and lessons that I feel could have been gained from Helen, Bertha, and BYH’s unabridged accounts, I’ll say no. And I’ll take the hit if needed; so when my kids hear someday after I’m gone that this guy Krey was a real @\$shole, maybe they would have denied it – if I hadn’t freely admitted it myself while I still walked this earth. This is the record that I am keeping, and now that they know that little secret, it won’t come as any surprise to them; in fact, I’ll issue that admission as my own Proclamation to the World, if you will.

So instead of saying “What? Not my dad! He wasn’t like that!” to someone accusing me of having been an @\$shole, my kids can just say, “Yep, I know, he told us so...and I try my best not to be one, since that was my dad’s main mission in life – to raise kids who aren’t @\$sholes!”

I could pretend to be a superhero who boldly resisted every temptation to act with self-interest, a noble character who always stood up for what was right, and I could try to present that fictional account to my posterity in an attempt to guilt them into following my pious example by

wanting to be more like me. Or I could tell them the whole story and let them learn from the mistakes as well. In my eyes, selling one side of the story effectively prevents a whole lot of lessons from being learned – and leads to the unnecessary repetition of critical mistakes.

I tend to believe in people’s good intentions, including those who selectively withhold information, even if I sometimes disagree with their underlying motive. A captured wartime spy doesn’t blab everything they know, for example, because they believe that their discretion complies with a greater cause; in some of these cases, I would consider keeping secrets to be outright heroic. I understand why people who feel they are engaged in a battle with sinister forces feel the responsibility to “Lie for the Lord”, for example, in order to advance the Kingdom of God – even at the price of truth; I have to admit I did the same thing with outdated, debunked videos as a missionary!

So I don’t want to call anybody’s character into question with this rhetoric; in the case of redacting Mormon history, however, I now believe that the battle is being fought on the wrong front, in a man-made Matrix that is merely a distraction. In my own conviction, for whatever that’s worth, the real battle is for the humane treatment of others, not for the preservation of a dogmatic system. Telling the whole story promotes introspective empathy that can help us treat others more humanely, even if an organization’s public image – or my own – is tarnished in the process. Withholding selected information to avoid reputational harm leads to incorrect conclusions and can undermine our ability to progress in life and treat others humanely; so whenever I get a chance to tell someone’s story, I am going to fight for a balanced portrayal, whether or not it shakes some institutional foundations.

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Half-Truth

Portraying Mormons as innocent victims driven from their homes by angry mobs has long been part of the galvanizing identity of the Saints. The stories that have formed the basis of this mentality are far from static, however, demonstrably morphing with each re-telling; stories about Carthage Jail, the Mormon Battalion, Hawn’s Mill, and Liberty Jail – to name just a few – have completely evolved over time. Perhaps some of the current, official accounts of these events are getting closer to reality now that so much more research is readily available, but in many cases only one side of the story is presented.

Finding out that many of the anti-Mormon accusations leading up to the violent episodes of Mormon history were actually true – but were publicly denied by Joseph Smith and other leaders at the time – can be anywhere from eye-opening to earth-shattering for faithful church members who had previously only heard sanitized accounts. When you contemplate the illegal harassment of the whistling and whittling brigades, for example, and then look at the fallout that occurred when they overstepped their mandates into Danite revenge, it definitely adds some context around the Mormon *extermination* from Missouri. Or when you consider how serious a crime was committed with the illegal destruction of a printing press – and how offensive that crime would have been to American citizens who focused so much of their patriotism on the Freedom of the Press – the flip side of the Carthage coin starts to materialize.



The imagery of the innocent lamb that Joseph invoked prior to his death implies that he willingly gave himself up in submission to God's will. [Never mind the fact that this particular lamb actually shot back at his attackers and struck a few in the process before submitting to his fate!] The phrase "like a lamb to the slaughter" implies complete innocence; it doesn't just infer that the lamb is less guilty than the slaughterer, but that the lamb possesses zero guilt at all – an absolute absence of guilt! Perhaps Joseph Smith didn't deserve a death sentence for his crimes, but if you ask me, he certainly deserved to be locked up in jail for violations committed against the Freedom of the Press.

Now that the whole story leading up to his arrest is available to anyone who wishes to look, I'd ask any believing Mormon a probing question: do you really believe that Joseph Smith was falsely accused as Mormon lesson manuals indicate? I'm assuming many would say yes; that's the victim-sided story I heard my whole life, after all! When I stood in the room where he was shot, I heard sobs from other Mormon tourists as they looked out the window and imagined the innocent lamb's helpless fall. Of course the mob lynching was a horribly illegal act in itself, and the tears are absolutely understandable. But when you've been told from your earliest memories that Joseph and his cell-mates were wrongfully imprisoned prior to the gun-battle in Carthage, coming to the realization that they actually deserved to be charged for crimes that they actually did commit – and that you would have locked them up yourself if you had been a duty-bound officer of the constitutional law at the time – can be quite disconcerting to say the least!

There is a current social media drive poking fun at the claim that polygamy had nothing to do with sex. Their catch phrase: "Not about the sex, my @\$!" Paraphrasing that catch phrase with a substitution, I would say the same thing here: "Lamb to the slaughter, my @\$!" Perhaps Joseph was innocent of a capital crime, but he was certainly guilty of a felony; in that light, the image of the blameless lamb presents a distorted exaggeration of reality, but it continues to receive all of the official airtime today without any countering context. And just as Mormon folklore portrays Joseph as a humble, innocent victim of the evil mobsters at Carthage, he is likewise portrayed in similar fashion with his reluctant obedience in taking on extramarital partners. He claimed that he was only doing God's will, after all!

Official church publications tend to focus on records written by priesthood holders – which can explain why so much of church history comes across from a male-dominated perspective. The

real story of Joseph Smith's unions and the other polygamous marriages that followed, however, may be more openly reflected by the accounts written in Helen and Bertha's journals than by the accounts presented in LDS lesson manuals. In Helen and Bertha's cases, the only thing more repugnant than entering into the union itself was the thought of the flames of hell consuming their souls – which they were told was the only viable alternative to submission.

Would you ever expect to see that horrible choice acknowledged in General Conference? Will these stories ever be told from the pulpit? Such an unlikely admission would just be a single step toward transparency, but I think there is a fear among the LDS leadership that the single step would start many adherents down a path of disillusionment with no return. Would the current organization be willing to distance itself from a man whose proven deceit shattered so many lives? Could there be Mormonism without Joseph Smith? Would there be scientology without L. Ron Hubbard? I don't know the answer; perhaps we should ask the Community of Christ. They seem to be doing just fine even with the acknowledgment that polygamy was not approved by God.

I don't expect the LDS church to throw Joseph Smith under the bus all at once, but I for one, disavow my association with the man I thought I knew. Off-the-wall interpretations of ancient symbols on papyrus are one thing. But coercing young girls into relationships against their will under threat of damnation while claiming to act as God's mouthpiece? To paraphrase Hugh Nibley's apologetics, "Sorry sir, that's not consent!"

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### *The Greater Good*

Let's take the concept of half-truths back to the hypothetical Herodites who insist on Herod's innocence. If the Herodites withheld the negative press about Herod from their own children – redacting both his proven crimes against humanity as well as unproven accusations – and only taught them about the great and wonderful things that he accomplished in keeping a cohesive kingdom running during a difficult period in history, wouldn't those children profess their so-called *knowledge* of his greatness to the end of their days? When faced with the insinuation of reprehensible crimes such as the Christmas story slaughter, they would likely proclaim his innocence, denying that their hero could possibly be guilty of such things.

Likewise, Mormons who have been sold a one-sided account of Joseph Smith's piety will claim right off that bat that he couldn't possibly be a baby killer like Herod. "I know it!" they will say, "I feel it right here in my heart!" Well, I would agree that the fictional character I thought I knew as a child could never have been capable of such a thing, and the unshakeable faith that I used to have in him would probably have continued if I had relied solely on the redacted truth; but the more I've learned about his actions and the underlying motives behind them from the full range of available sources, the more I wonder how far he would go with his desperation to maintain control of the movement that he founded – especially if he believed that the survival of that movement trumped every other cause on earth, be it past, present, or future!

History has shown that the *absolute* belief in a greater good can be used to rationalize *absolutely* anything. With a strong enough belief, people will even sacrifice their own souls for the greater cause. Picture the predicament faced by Wilford Woodruff, for example: Without polygamy, the Saints couldn't be saved. But with it, the Kingdom would crumble. At least publicly – and perhaps in their eyes only temporarily – the Church gave up what was supposedly a saving ordinance when faced with the alternative of utter destruction.

How about killing babies? Can that ever be rationalized? I guess it comes down to whether your cause supercedes the collateral damage in your own conscience. Let's jump around the history books a bit to find some examples:

If the airman looking through the bombsight on the Enola Gay, for instance, could have uttered a sincere prayer and connected with deity in the instant that his thumb was resting on the bomb release – if he could have asked his maker a single yes/no question and tried to get in tune with the response – would he have felt a divine prompting to push the button, knowing that thousands and thousands of civilians, including innocent babies, would be killed or horribly disfigured in the chain reaction that followed? If so, you could say that those killings were approved by God, with the threat of the alternative – in this case a prolonged battle on the ground – superceding the collateral damage and providing an exceptional clause to the commandment, “Thou Shalt not Kill.”

Perhaps Thomas Ferebee, the Midwestern farm boy who actually released the bomb, was right in following his orders and dropping the “Little Boy” bomb on the unsuspecting population of Nagasaki. It is no surprise that the plane accompanying the Enola Gay to photograph the aftermath was dubbed “Necessary Evil”, which is just how Thomas viewed his job. As a Christian, he knew the Ten Commandments; yet he stated for the record that he didn't regret his role in bringing to pass the deadly mushroom cloud, because in his words it was “a job that had to be done.” As far as the innocent young Japanese victims, if the United States lost the war, these babies might grow up to become Ferebee's own hardened enemies, threatening vastly more innocent children back on the home front. In all likelihood, he shared his superiors' belief that prolonging the war would have resulted in many more deaths than Oppenheimer's deadly little toy.

Fast forwarding a few decades, the U.S. pilots flying drones around Afghanistan can now easily zoom in on their own collateral damage in real time. In some cases, those drone attacks have been based on reliable intelligence; in other cases, we sometimes find out in hindsight that the intelligence was flawed. In the latter scenario, would it matter whether the distribution of false intelligence was sparked by ignorance, fear, lies, vengeance, impatience, or power trips? In the event of an innocent death, does the credibility of the evidence justify or vilify the drone pilot at the end of the day? Or can the pilot's belief in U.S. supremacy reconcile a commitment to follow orders from higher command no matter what?

Turning it around, the 9/11 hijackers would have seen many of their victims at close range as they stood in line to board their last plane. If one of them happened to have looked into the eyes of the day's youngest victim – in this case a three-year old on her way to Australia – would the hijacker have wavered in his resolve to see the plan through? Or given his level of conviction, would he have coldly called the child's death a necessary evil or collateral damage – subordinate to his overall cause – and proceeded with the task at hand? The power of indoctrination is formidable; the resolution to proceed as planned had already been made, and I honestly don't think any glance into a child's eyes at that point could possibly have changed the outcome.

Taking it back to the Wild West, Helen Hampton claimed that BYH collaborated with the Danites, a group deriving its name from a biblical prophecy that in their eyes gave Mormons – as the embodiment of God's Kingdom on the earth – absolute supremacy to take the land and possess it “for ever, even for ever and ever.” In the Old Testament references cited by the Danites, the Tribes of Israel had divine permission to exterminate every living thing that stood in their path. I must say I've been relieved to find out that biblical scholars are virtually unanimous in calling most of these accounts of wholesale slaughter pure fiction, but I do find it a bit disturbing that to this day



Christians still sing praises to the valour of the sword-wielding troops whose shouts brought down the defensive walls of Jericho and other heathen strongholds.

Abraham is honoured for having the willingness and subservience to kill a child by billions of Christian, Muslims, and Jews worldwide – most of whom are probably relieved that he didn't have to see it through – but in the case of the Army of Israel, we essentially cheer them on as they go about their business of genocide. In many biblical accounts, the entire population, including men, women, and children – and surely babies as well – were eradicated, justified by a more righteous cause than the Canaanites and other tribes of infidels could ever muster. Despite what would have been a traumatic atrocity, at the end of the day, a random foot soldier in Joshua's battalion could probably sleep in peace after wiping the blood from his sword, aided by a conviction that he had done "what needed to be done."

The bloodshed of Mountain Meadows may have been justified by its perpetrators in similar fashion. Many accounts of that horrible event – at least the half-truths that found their way into my seminary lessons – painted the perpetrators as evil rogues acting without a directive from above; any connection to Brigham Young or church headquarters has historically been met with an outright denial by Mormon apologists. Again, if any hard proof of the connection existed in the church archives, it would surely be kept under lock and key to this day, so the absence of evidence may not be as significant as it seems; but my problem with this excuse is that you don't even need any direct order to see his complicity in the travesty. Whether or not he had any role in directing the actions, Brigham Young had encouraged the proliferation of tales depicting one-sided Mormon victimization and had openly promised deadly consequences for any gentile that represented a threat; maybe that's not enough to implicate him as the only guilty party, but to me the most disturbing chapter that can be substantiated with actual records occurred after news of the massacre reached him. Brigham Young's reaction on hearing the news can essentially be summed up in two words: "Good riddance!" Brigham Young's revelling would likely never see the light of day again if today's LDS sources were the only publishers, but thanks to the internet, the original sources containing Brigham Young's words are widely available, and the fact that the massacre was welcome news to him is no longer refuted by the LDS Church.

I have to let this one sink in for a while, since I'm linked to this man's name not just through my fossilized family history, but on my current social media profiles as well. So let me get this straight: Brigham Young welcomed the news of the Mountain Meadows Massacre – he welcomed the fact that babies had been taken by their feet, and swung in the air, and had their skulls bashed in against wagon wheels. Does it matter whether or not he actually ordered the clandestine strike as Deseret's self-proclaimed dictator? To me his reaction says it all: these people were his enemies, and just like a medieval crusader, he believed they were better off dead than living as heathen infidels, with the potential to grow up as his enemies.

Moving on to his godson, BYH claims that he was wrongfully imprisoned for one of the most notorious murders in Utah's history. Just like he took the fall for those up the chain in the sex scandal, in this case I believe he took the fall for those under his command who actually committed the act. But to me the most surprising and disturbing revelation coming out of the murder of the gentile dentist, Dr. Thomas Robinson, is the fact that when two representatives sent by Brigham Young came to get BYH out of jail, BYH believed that they had been sent to kill him.

Now why would he believe that? Let's think this one through: They had been sent by his own Godfather; and he actually believed the Godfather himself was capable of directing a mafia-style hit! Maybe some can attribute that to paranoia, but I for one, have to ask myself why it seemed like a

realistic scenario. And to me, the only reasonable answer to that question is that BYH knew the “old boss” – and his tendency to order pre-emptive strikes – well enough to justify those fears.

BYH’s own autobiography is divided into sections for which he scripted his own headings. Is it any surprise that these titles include captions such as “Always have the drop on our enemies” and “Strike the First Blow”?

Less than ten pages into the Book of Mormon, readers are faced with the trade-off between the destruction of one soul – Laban being the first of several examples – against the overarching goal of preserving the Kingdom of God at any cost. So if Joseph Smith was caught fathering children with the maidens of Nauvoo, and if the revelation of these pregnancies would compromise his work, can we draw any parallels to the Sword of Laban? Maybe Joseph Smith fully believed that he had restored God’s kingdom on earth regardless of what went on in his bedroom. If so, could he allow the salvation of humanity to be threatened by his extramarital indiscretions? A single soul is certainly a small price to pay when the whole fate of not just this planet but “worlds without number” is at stake!

In the Book of Mormon story, Laban had passed out and couldn’t possibly defend himself. And just like Laban’s head, perhaps the price for the preservation of the Kingdom of Nauvoo had to be paid by a defenseless, unborn victim.

In Laban’s case, the need for a pre-emptive strike might be apparent. If he had been allowed to see another day, Laban would have woken up with a hangover – and would have then promptly ordered his mercenaries to pursue Lehi’s clan. So his death was a justifiable, necessary evil that God Himself condoned. Could the same be said for children? Well, justifiable or not, isn’t that the same excuse used by Thomas Ferebee as well as soldiers under the direction of Hitler, Stalin, Herod, Pharaoh, or Joshua? Isn’t that the same rationalization that John Lee and the criminals under his direction must have made when they found babies among their enemies? When these babies grow up, won’t they turn into formidable threats? Aren’t they better off dead? Any affirmative answers to these questions effectively justifies a pre-emptive strike.

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In the end, I am trying to draw some parallels with the potential justifications, but I am not trying to convince anyone one way or the other about Herod or Joseph Smith being baby killers. I honestly don’t know whether or not either event actually occurred. But I do want to point out the similarities between the underlying arguments: following the same logic, what holds for one could either indict or exonerate both together. Maybe Joseph Smith was appalled at the abortions that John Bennet performed after admittedly philandering around Nauvoo. Maybe Joseph never actually promoted that sort of solution among his own wives. Then again, maybe Herod never ordered babies to be massacred, either. I certainly don’t know the answer to either question, but lacking hard evidence, my opinion in both cases keeps coming down to character.

When I recite the Christmas story to my children, should I choose to present the story about Herod as a historical truth merely because I am convinced that he was just that sort of guy? If I can condemn Herod for atrocities for which I have no evidence, should I take the same leap of plausibility with Joseph Smith? If so, I find myself facing a very uncomfortable image, because I am completely convinced that if Joseph Smith was caught as the illegitimate father of an underage, pregnant girl in the community that he was overseeing, he would have done anything – absolutely anything – to protect the “greater good” of his own legacy.

Brigham Young was well known for his ultimatums, as demonstrated by his famous “Go to Provo or go to hell” comment that showed up on T Shirts all over BYU campus during my time there. But as audacious as Brigham Young was, he claimed that everything he learned about polygamy and even about blood atonement came directly from Joseph Smith’s mouth, which he further claimed to be merely a relay for God’s own will. So although blood atonement may have been preached most bluntly by Brigham Young, it certainly wasn’t his idea. I believe he would have claimed it for himself if he had come up with it himself, but he gave the credit for the idea to Joseph Smith. You can point the finger at God if you wish, but that particular doctrine – as expounded by both Joseph Smith and Brigham Young – shows just how far faithful followers are expected to go in the name of salvation.

Brigham Young was known for telling a husband right in the middle of general conference – in front of all his peers and family – that he would go to hell if he didn’t comply with the directive to marry more wives and then leave them to serve missions. Again, history has shown this to be a precedent set by his predecessor.

It really doesn’t surprise me to find BYH telling women they would go to hell if they disobeyed his demands; he was probably treated the same way himself by Brigham Young and by his other church leaders. In church records, like so many other priesthood holders in his day, BYH appears to be a God-fearing Mormon deserving of admiration for his sacrifices. From all appearances, whenever a direct order came down the chain, he just fell into line. His willingness to throw himself under the wagon wheel gained him the trust of those in the highest positions. When members of the first presidency were seeking to evade authorities on charges of cohabitation, for example, he risked his own imprisonment by harboring the fugitives in his own home.

He also sold everything he owned to serve a cotton-picking mission (literally!), leaving behind four young children. Somehow this act of submission is seen as righteous offering because he did what God was asking of him through Brigham Young as a direct mouthpiece. But that’s exactly what makes this sort of compliance so disturbing: Many faithful girls in their day believed that Brigham Young and Joseph Smith literally spoke for God – and that God Himself had authored the phrase “by the mouth of mine own servants, it is the same!” As much as many of them abhorred the idea of polygamy, when the advances were made, some prospective plural wives felt like God Himself was asking it of them, demanding that they sacrifice their own bodies like Isaac on the altar.

Both Joseph Smith and Brigham Young said some absolutely awful things that the church will probably never even put into print in their searchable online archives. While I believe some of those statements are incredibly offensive, I am not suggesting we strike them from the record. I am merely suggesting that we consider all available angles of each story in reaching our own conclusions. I believe that even those that are considered inappropriate today should remain as a testimonial of the context at the time.

When I look at the Y on the hill above my alma mater, it makes me wonder *why* this man’s legacy has been tattooed into a mountainside for all below to gaze upon. And why does that man’s name continue to accompany my profile wherever I go? As much as I stand against redactions, I’ll break the rule here and expunge my historical record with a redaction of my own: I think it’s high time I take a stand and drop Brigham Young’s name from my personal profile. While of course I can’t undo the fact that I attended an institution that bore his name at the time, perhaps it will not always be so. In the meantime, I have to admit that it nauseates me to dress up my cv with the name of a man who spewed out racist rhetoric in God’s name. So there you go: having removed his name from my resumes and social media profiles, I’m now guilty of redaction as well. So who am I to judge others for their own redactions?

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### *Testimonial*

In Brigham Young Hampton's case, he acknowledges the "lashing" that he gave those who wronged him. Others describe "whippings" that his wives received, the severity of which may be open to interpretation; but decades later, when pressed for details about her marriage, Helen couldn't bear to recite them. We can only guess at the details of what actually occurred behind closed doors, but given the written accounts, I would assume the abuse was quite brutal.

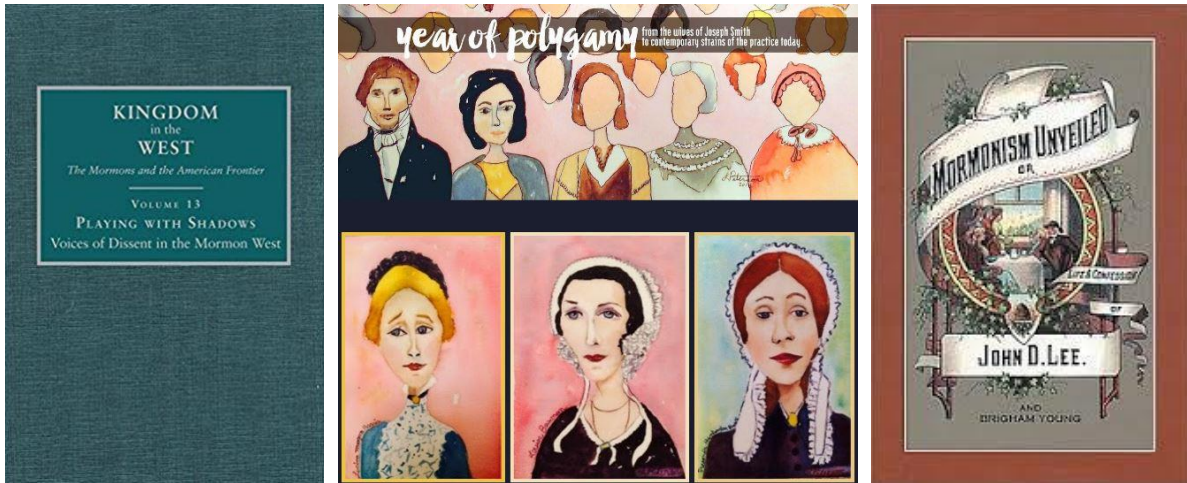
I do want to try to see all sides of the issue and trace any actions to their root cause wherever we have enough information to do so. In accusing BYH of being an abuser, does his own history of having been abused himself provide any justifying context? According to his own words, both he and his mother were savagely and "unmercifully" beaten and abused by his "gentile" step-father; would it really be any surprise to find out that he exercised what he learned as a child when he needed compliance or so-called consent for something as an adult? Can his admitted hatred and mistrust of so-called gentiles be blamed on his own childhood abuser, shielding him from guilt for his own intolerance?

In the eyes of those who believe in the eternal validity of LDS ordinances, those questions – along with everything else I have said about him – become entirely irrelevant to BYH's post-mortal standing thanks to a special get-out-of-jail-free card. As they neared the end of their own mortal journeys, BYH and Wife #3 ultimately received their free ticket to the Kingdom directly from the prophet himself in the form of a second anointing. According to the ceremonial words, having his calling and election "made sure" essentially ensures his salvation forevermore – with no correlation to any earthly actions whatsoever!

When I looked at BYH's photo in my family history albums as a child, I actually viewed him as that absolved soul. But where I used to see prime pioneer stock – an anointed man who had given his all for Zion – now I see a different character altogether; regardless of any absolution that he may have felt upon receiving his pardon from the prophet, I simply don't see any way around the notion that he was an abusive [PONCS] and that the supposed mouthpiece of God whom he revered sanctioned those non-consensual acts. In both cases, perhaps some of those acts can be explained by looking at incidents of childhood trauma. But let's be honest about the effects – and how to encourage prevention – instead of trying to pretend it all went down like some whitewashed Pioneer Day parade!

My goal here is not universal condemnation; perhaps we're all in glass houses and no stones should be thrown at all. My aim is simply to promote the balanced presentation of the whole available truth – or at least what's left of it to look at – when people are deciding whether they ought to dedicate their life to a particular philosophy.

Here are a few images showing some of the available sources that contain Helen and Bertha Hampton's testimonies:



I hope their words are given equal air time going forward. The missing pages of BYH’s journal, however, may have permanently disappeared from the record, leaving me with all sorts of questions. Who redacted his testimony? Who decided that Helen’s testimony should be thrown out after she lost her faith in the cause? Were these efforts to spare embarrassment for the family, the church, or both? As for me, I’m done worrying about embarrassment. I’m facing the back side of the hill with my next couple of birthdays, and as the Australians say, “I can’t be bothered” to keep up one-sided images anymore.

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Benediction

Mormons are taught to close any lesson or talk with a challenge and a testimony, and I sometimes catch myself doing that as part of my inherent presentation style even when I’m teaching secular subjects like water hammer or dam design. For better or worse, when I wrap up a topic, my punctuation mark of choice invariably becomes a testimonial exclamation point. In keeping with that habit, here’s my feeble attempt at a testimony and a direct challenge to close out this particular chapter:

If you happen to dig up some dirt in your family history, go ahead and disavow that particular practice for yourself if you feel the need to. But don’t deny the event’s occurrence. Don’t bury your history or sweep it back into the closet. State the truth. Own it if it’s yours. And even if falls outside of a previous comfort zone, use that truth to make the world a better place!

To my siblings, parents, children, cousins, second cousins and so on who are descended from BYH through Wife #3:

When you write your own history and decide what to pass along and what to omit, will you let your own posterity know of the rampant abuse committed by our own forefathers in trying to comply with the principle of polygamy? Will you use their real stories, in this case including the accounts of Wives #1 and #2, for the purpose of breaking any ongoing cycle of abuse? If your kids feel their own blood boiling when they read it, will you let them have that right to feel angry? If so, perhaps it will help them stand up against abuse among their own peers or avoid being suckered into a one-sided, self-serving relationship themselves someday!

Or will you try to bury any negative accounts as those before us have done? If your plan is to pass along only the positive examples and hope that will do the trick, good luck with that; maybe your kids will never find out the whole story, and fictional, piecemeal accounts will remain their sole

truth until their own mortal journey ends. Or maybe they'll end up doing a bit of family history sleuthing on their own when they're approaching fifty years old as I did – in which case I again call up the visual of Mr. Nitro Glycerine that I shared at the beginning of this article as a very fitting analogy for my own research experience.

So why would I recommend digging up Helen and Bertha's testimonies of atrocious sexual abuse and putting it out into the open? Well, one reason might be that an organization that covers up and denies the sexual abuse in its past may tend to want to do the same with ongoing sexual abuse today. To me the acknowledgment of Helen and Bertha's testimonies would be a good first step in recognizing the systematic abuse that was condoned and taught from the very top back in their day – and making sure that it is eradicated along with any hint of supposed male superiority or divine approval going forward.

As far as the real reasons Joseph Smith decided to implement polygamy, I honestly don't have any idea. By his own admission, he was wondering why God granted Solomon the desires of his heart, including hundreds of wives and concubines. The question alone raises serious concerns about his own motives; whatever the case, I do know the story that I was sold about it being a temporary solution to get destitute, surplus women across the frozen plains after their husbands had been killed by intolerant mobs is utter nonsense. And whatever alternative account you accept, I believe that the real truth of the matter should be disturbing to anyone who looks at it, whether you're an apologist, a critic, or simply undecided on the matter. Yes, some people received their own spiritual witnesses of its sanctity in the end – that is well documented. But just like fundamentalists today continue to receive their own spiritual witnesses of the principle and write their testimonies of abusive practices in their own journals to be passed along to their children, those feelings don't make the practice divine. As a Latter-day Saint, you may believe in a divine origin for polygamy, and it's obviously your right to pass that conviction along to your children, but even in light of that view, I believe that excluding the real, brutal sacrifices made in fulfilment of the principle plays down the very sacrifices they wanted to offer up to their Lord.

Well, I'd like to finally put this subject to rest, so this is the testimony, last of all, that I'll leave to my own children on this topic: True consent is free of threats, coercion, or manipulation. The Mormon institution of polygamy was founded on those tactics and has **NOTHING WHATSOEVER** to do with God!

Chapter 8: Ultimatum

My Analogy: Say Something!

“What do you call a relationship without mutual accountability?”

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A friend of mine named Katie recently told me that she and her husband, Mateo, were separating. To me they had always seemed content, if not happy, so I was pretty shocked at the news. I wasn't sure if I should dig any deeper into what drove them apart, but I took the gamble and asked if she wouldn't mind sharing her story with me. She responded with this letter:

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Krey,

Thanks for asking about our story. We've had quite a history, so this may take some time. As I think back about it, Matt and I actually had a great relationship over the years; I can't deny some of the beautiful, transcendent moments that we shared...so it really is quite a shock to find myself in our current situation.

Our history goes way back to our childhood in the Bronx; in fact, I can't even remember a time without Matt. We were great friends as kids, although I always found him a little odd. In elementary school, he used to just spit out anything that came to his mind, whether it made any sense or not. If he got into trouble, he would say whatever he had to in order to get himself out of a bind. Some of his stories were completely inconceivable, but if anyone tried to catch him in a lie, he'd come up with an even crazier story to cover it. He also had a bit of a violent streak. In junior high, for example, one time he beat up some of the people who picked on me, and even though he went a bit over the top with his aggression, somehow he managed to talk his way out of even going to the principal's office.

Although he stood up for me, it came at a price: He wanted my full attention and became very possessive. We became an item in high school, and he demanded complete exclusivity. I noticed that he was very concerned about what people thought of him. He would go to great lengths to paint himself as a model student with an impeccable character, even though he had quite a colorful past.

He had a lot of friends, but he wasn't necessarily popular. People liked to be associated with him, because he had a lot of connections, but they weren't very comfortable hanging around with him one-on-one, probably because he always thought he was right. He became well respected in a way, but every once in a while people would mention things about his past that would set him off. He would get very defensive and illogical; his unreasonable excuses never made sense to me, but any challenge would end up in endless circles, and I just didn't have the patience to do enough homework to call him on it.

Maybe these things should have set off warning bells, but he treated me well and despite these shortcomings we had a good relationship. Sure, there were some tough times, but we were in it together and we got through each challenge in one piece.

We continued as a couple in college at NYU, and Matt started dabbling in journalism. When there was an issue he really cared about, he would write newspaper editorials and gloat about it when they were published. I used to help him proof-read his drafts, and he would scrutinize every word a hundred times, considering how it would affect his image, before he could bring himself to lick the stamp and seal the envelope. Even so, his strong opinions tended to backfire on him, and he always seemed surprised at the very predictable public response to his articles.

I didn't have a lot of money as a college student, so it was comforting to know that he could bail me out financially if I ever needed it. He never talked about where he had his money stashed, but apparently he must have made some pretty wise investments, because he never had to worry about his own cash flow.

Even though we were exclusive, and I never cheated on him, he was still very suspicious about any other guy I associated with. He seemed very controlling, but I did see some attempts at change, and I loved him deeply. We used to talk for hours about our future and the beautiful home we were going to build. I think he really went through some self-awareness during our college years that softened him up; by the time we graduated, he even began to retract some of the previous hard-line statements that he had posted in editorials and on his Facebook page.

The wedding was more of a formality; in fact, I don't remember even thinking about it as a choice. It was just something we did; in fact, I can't even say how long we were engaged because there was no real proposal; he knew I was his girl and we just picked a date. Neither of us really questioned it; we just figured it was meant to be.

I always found it a little odd how he would question my commitment, even after the wedding. He would ask me to tell me I loved him and only him. We actually had this routine where I had to recite my wedding vows to him out loud over and over again. I said them so many times that I had them memorized and eventually began to believe everything they said – in particular that he was *the* one and only – and that we were meant to be. He told me he was the only one who could keep me safe from the other guys out there who might hurt me. Although he usually dressed in a business suit, he had been in enough fights in his younger days that I knew he could be dangerous if crossed. Odd as his warnings seemed, I felt like I needed his protection, and I was confident that he had my back.

A crucial turning point came when I ran across an old photo on his Facebook page. It was a picture of him with his arm around another woman. The caption read “Me and my sister Abriella, 1992”. I knew Abi had passed away a long time before, back when we were first dating, and I had never met her myself. Come to think of it, neither had anyone else in our circle of friends. The Facebook photo was, in fact, the first and only picture I had ever seen of her; I filed it away in my head and didn’t think of it again for several years.

Then one day I was loading up Netflix, and I ran across a documentary about a brothel that had made the news when it were raided by police and suspiciously caught fire. In the film, they interviewed a call girl who had worked at the brothel. I was hit with the strange realization that this call girl looked strikingly similar to the girl in Matt’s photo.

“I noticed something strange today,” I said when he came home from work that night, “You know that call girl who’s been on the news?”

He nodded.

“Have you noticed that she looks just like your sister Abi?”

“Nope,” he replied nervously.

“Maybe we can we watch the next episode...”

“I’m going to have to warn you to stop watching Netflix altogether,” he interrupted, “From now on, I only want you to read and watch what I’ve approved.”

I was awfully confused, but he quickly changed the subject and wanted to play a board game together.

Despite his stern warnings, though, I just couldn’t help myself. The resemblance was uncanny. So the next day I looked at his Facebook page again and downloaded the picture. When I zoomed in on it, I noticed some distinct oddities. For one, when I looked closely at the photo, I could see that he was wearing a ring I had bought for him – years after his sister had supposedly died.

“Pure coincidence,” he replied when I asked him about it, “My sister gave me one just like it long before we ever met.”

I guess that sounded remotely plausible, but the chance that she had bought him the same ring years before was so overwhelmingly minute that I decided to look into it further. I dug around on Facebook and to my horror found posts from some of Matt’s secret ex-girlfriends. It turned out he hadn’t been as exclusive as I had thought, and I was completely shocked to find out that his other exes had all gone through a similar investigation about “Abi.” Some, in fact, had taken fingerprints from inside Matt’s car and had commissioned DNA samples, voice prints from videos, facial recognition, and other technologies to determine the identity of the girl in the picture. They had all reached the same conclusion: The woman in the photo was not Matt’s sister.

I kept up my own online research for more clues; when I downloaded the digital photo from Facebook and checked the metadata, it showed that the photo had been taken on a camera in 2006 that, of course, couldn’t have existed in 1992. To me, that proved conclusively that Matt was lying, and I was convinced that the girl in the photo was the prostitute I had seen on TV. I printed out the statements from Matt’s exes and thought I had collected enough evidence to challenge him.

“There are far more serious things going on here that you can possibly understand!” he said when I confronted him with the records, “I can’t believe that you didn’t trust me when I told you not to click on links that I haven’t approved.”

“And I can’t believe you’re throwing the blame back at me,” I blurted.

He shook his head, disappointed in the betrayal, “I won’t be able to protect you from the criminals who framed me if they find out that you are snooping around. How dare you disobey me?”

My mind was spinning with questions about what sort of business he might be involved in.

“Now that you’ve gone and violated my trust, though, I guess I’m going to have to explain some things you aren’t ready to hear yet.”

“OK...”

“The girl in the photograph isn’t really my literal sister...but you know full well that we’re all brothers and sisters here on earth, so in a way she is my sister. And I never told you that she was my real, biological sister – just *a* sister. And I honestly have always thought of her as my sister, so what I said on the Facebook page was definitely *not* a lie.”

My brain was still coming to grips with the newsflash that the girl in the photo was the same prostitute I had seen on TV, which left me a bit creeped out, wondering what Matt was doing with her in the first place. “So you never...”

“Never ever ever!” he shouted back, “How dare you accuse me of adultery!”

“Listen,” I said, “I’m not accusing you of anything, I just want to know the whole story.”

“Well, I’m not ready to tell you the rest of the story yet,” Matt replied, “and it sounds like you’re not ready to hear it yet either. There’s a whole lot you’re going to have to do to prepare yourself for the answers.”

I was exhausted and decided to let it rest for the time being; I meant to bring it up again, but we had a few nice trips planned, and I didn’t want to ruin those. Eventually I just pushed it to the back of my mind; we went on our trips together, and continued on with this awkward phase of our marriage for years.

Matt wasn’t necessarily abusive, but it was a one-sided relationship; he always seemed to turn things around to put himself in a shining light and make everything seem like my fault. He acted like he had all the answers, and he treated me like I was incapable of digesting them. The term *gaslighting* was new to me, but I started going to therapy and it became a regular part of my vocabulary once I recognized the signs.

In the end, I did find out that he had cheated on me after all. But one thing that I found really odd about that revelation is that most guys who cheat on their partner with a prostitute would probably try to hide that fact, or at least you’d think they might try to bury it once they’ve been exposed. But once his lies had come to light, he seemed almost proud to keep the photo up on his Facebook page; it wasn’t just buried somewhere on his timeline, he actually highlighted it as one of his featured pictures. But he never changed the caption.

This sort of bizarre behavior continued day after day; eventually I cracked and brought up the issue with the conflicting dates, which seemed like indisputable evidence to me. Even though Matt had already admitted that the girl in the picture wasn’t his sister Abi, he still stuck to the date

when I questioned him about it, claiming that the photo had indeed been taken in 1992. I shook my head and asked him why he wouldn't just correct the date, since everyone knew that was a lie.

"It's no lie!" he shouted, "The photo *is* actually from 1992, but someone must have taken my camera, reset the date, and swapped the file on my computer."

"But digital cameras didn't even exist in 1992!" I said, "so how can that be?"

"Exactly," he said, changing his story, "Someone must have stolen the photograph that had been printed from the negative in 1992, and then in 2006, they must have used a new digital camera to snap a digital photo of the print itself. So it all makes sense if you would just think it through with that little brain of yours. Even though the timestamp is wrong, the caption is technically correct. So don't you go around accusing me of lying!"

The belittling accusations were really starting to get to me, and I lost my temper. "You don't even have a sister named Abi," I shouted, finally fessing up about some of the research I had been doing, "I checked with the Department of vital records. They say you were an only child!"

"See? There you go again with your ignorant assumptions. Well, you know what? I actually *did* have a sister named Abi," he said, "but she was born prematurely at home and never got a birth certificate."

"So there's no record of her existence whatsoever?"

"No, sorry, you're just going to have to trust me on this."

"You just made her up to suit your own needs," I countered, "and to cover up your relationship with the hooker!"

"You're getting caught up in all of these meaningless, intellectual details," he said, "None of this really matters anyway, right? How we feel about each other is the main thing. Can't we just drop the subject? I had Fruit Loops for breakfast today. What did you have?"

"No, I need some answers," I said, realizing how stupidly I had let him switch to unrelated subjects over the years at the first hint of discomfort, "and what do Fruit Loops have to do with anything, anyway?"

"Listen, there is more to this story than is safe to tell you right now."

"Go figure," I said.

"That photo was my sister Abi after all," he said, "but you'll have to swear with an oath that you'll never pass along what I'm about to tell you."

This was getting really weird. "But how can I agree to that if I don't even know what bomb you're going to drop on me?" I asked.

"It's the only way," he said, "Take it or leave it. But remember, there could be secret agents outside my door, so I'm going to have to whisper the answer to you."

I was intrigued enough to consent, so we shook on it, which felt really weird. "Fine," I said, bowing my head, "Yes."

"OK, what I didn't tell you before," he whispered, "is that someone took the only photo I had of my sister and photoshopped the prostitute's face on her."

“That’s your big secret?” I asked, “But why would anyone...”

“Don’t ask questions!” Matt said abruptly, “That wasn’t part of the deal. Just look at the picture. It’s obviously a doctored image; can’t you see it clearly now?”

“No!” I answered, “It doesn’t make any sense at all; and besides, the DNA evidence has already shown that you hooked up with that prostitute.”

“That may be true, but you have to remember that I’m only trying to protect her,” Matt said, “And you’re making that very hard to do right now.”

“Whatever your new story is, the caption on your Facebook page still says it’s your sister,” I stated, pointing at the online picture, “Look, I just don’t get it. Help me out here: Is this your sister in 1992?”

“Yes”

I pointed at the same picture again: “Is this the prostitute in 2006.”

“Yes”

“What? That doesn’t make any sense at all; those two statements can’t both be true unless your sister was a time-traveling whore!”

Matt just shook his head condescendingly, “Like I said, you’re not ready for the whole truth yet. You couldn’t even stomach it if I told you.”

“Try me,” I said.

He responded with nothing but a silent, blank stare.

“Say something!” I demanded.

He still wouldn’t reply, so I grabbed the car keys and told him I needed to go for a drive. After a few hours stirring through all of the implications, I came back and told him I couldn’t trust him anymore. When I told him I wanted to take some time away to sort things out for myself, he started into all sorts of horror stories, telling me that all other couples have terrible relationships. Either they fight and bicker all the time or their relationships are all dreary and boring with no purpose – not to mention the venereal diseases that are running rampant everywhere! There was no light and no safe harbor outside our relationship, he said. And if I left him, I would be absolutely miserable for the rest of my life, which wouldn’t last long, given the diseases I was likely to contract and the nature of the abusive partners who would be insane enough to take a gamble on me.

He then moved into making threats about his friends and extended family, who would surely unfriend me if they heard I had left him. His parents were very traditional and did not believe in divorce; he told me they would be especially offended if they heard about me leaving, since in their eyes a woman isn’t entitled to make demands of a man. They had apparently taught him well; that just isn’t how it works in their family, he told me, so they may well disown me as their daughter-in-law when they find out about this betrayal.

Well, I decided to take my chances anyway, since I couldn’t imagine feeling any worse about myself than I did when I was with him.

“Delete the picture,” I demanded as a parting shot, hoping he could show me one small action that might give me a glimmer of hope for a future together.

He said nothing.

“Take it down or I’m leaving,” I repeated.

Silence.

“Say something!”

His silent refusal and the callous stare on his face made me shudder, because I started to wonder whether he might have had something to do with the brothel fire, God forbid. I didn’t want to let myself entertain such a horrible thought or believe that he might have been capable of trying to bury the evidence of his escapades with deadly force; but he wouldn’t dignify my challenge with a response, so I walked out the door and haven’t seen him since.

My therapist told me some distance might be good; so I took her advice, and we’re on a trial separation now. I told myself I’d give it one year before finalizing the separation with a divorce. If the photo was gone before the year was up, I might reconsider. Every once in a while, I’ll check his Facebook profile, and sure enough, that photo of him with the prostitute is still there to this day, so I don’t see much hope for a reconciliation.

Now that we’ve been separated for almost a year, I’m seeing that I can share beautiful experiences with someone other than Matt; maybe that should be obvious, but it was a new revelation to me! And I’ve learned that some of the great times I had with Matt don’t necessarily mean that we were right for each other. I also see that I don’t need his protection after all, and never really did; in fact, I wish others had protected me from him. I see now that he was lucky to have me, but his refusal to do the one little thing I demanded of him shows me that I never meant that much to him in the first place.

This break-up was by no means easy. You know, once you’ve been in a committed relationship for so long, it actually forms part of your identity. Breaking it off is like severing a part of yourself. My family didn’t make it any easier. When I called them up to let them know we were splitting up, they cried. They believe so strongly in the institution of marriage that the news really hurt them. My sister, for example, says she knows her husband has cheated on her, too – and continues to do so – but she shrugs it aside because he makes her feel good about herself and about the world. A break-up would decimate that image, and now I’m beginning to wonder if the tears they cried about my news weren’t really for me, but for how the broken marriage would reflect on our family.

During the first few weeks of our separation, I felt a darkness, like some force was telling me I needed to go back to that safety net; as it turned out, it wasn’t darkness or anything foreboding after all; it was just fear of the unknown. Now I see that leaving Matt has actually had the most comforting effect on my life, and I like myself much better these days. I feel much more at peace, and honestly, I don’t think I could ever get hitched again; I just don’t have it in me. Will I regret it someday? Will I ever want to go back to him? I really can’t picture it; not unless I see a much bigger change than when we were together.

As far as whether that’s a possibility, it is entirely in his court at this point. I have put the ultimatum out to the universe, and I cannot control how or whether it is implemented. If he decides that I mean more to him than a Facebook photo, I might take that as a sign that we at least have a possibility of rebuilding our relationship; maybe then we’ll see if someday we could be better together...“together forever” like we thought we would be in the beginning. If not, I guess divorce is our only option.

Now that I see the word *divorce* in my own letter here, though, it sounds so final. I keep thinking of all of our experiences and how we both felt like we were destined for each other. I told myself I wouldn't contact him again until he gets the divorce papers, but maybe he really loves me and the secret agents or the mafia won't let him change his Facebook page. Maybe I shouldn't have given him this ultimatum. Maybe I could help him realize what he did wrong, because even if it doesn't work out for us, I should be looking out for his future partners who might get treated the same way if he doesn't change. I'm starting to feel bad for being so blunt about it, for forcing his hand. Maybe I went too far. I've already started to drop el Dies from my name and change it back to my maiden name, Pilcheck. Do you think I should wait longer before doing something that drastic?

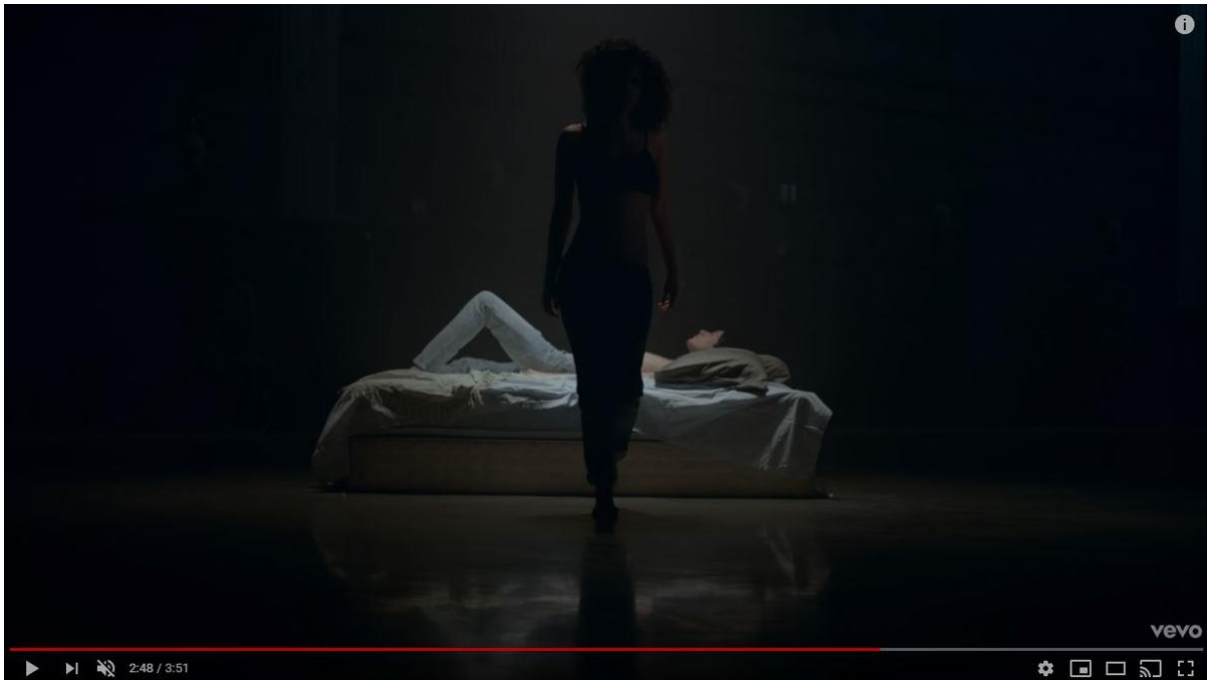
The other day I watched the video for the song "Say Something," and I saw myself in the girl's face as she left her man behind. Should she keep walking, or should she turn around and give him another chance? Maybe he wants to say something but just can't. The song's lyrics seem to fit my oscillating emotions: *I would have followed him anywhere. Now I know nothing at all; should I swallow my pride? He's the one that I love; should I say good-bye?*

This is the dilemma I'm dealing with today. What do you think I should do?

Sincerely yours,

Katie Pilcheck

~~~~~



Say something...

*Say something, I'm giving up on you  
I'll be the one if you want me to  
Anywhere I would've followed you  
Say something, I'm giving up on you*

*And I am feeling so small  
It was over my head  
I know nothing at all*

*And I will stumble and fall  
I'm still learning to love  
Just starting to crawl*

*Say something, I'm giving up on you  
I'm sorry that I couldn't get to you  
Anywhere I would've followed you  
Say something, I'm giving up on you*

*And I will swallow my pride  
You're the one that I love  
And I'm saying goodbye*

*Say something, I'm giving up on you  
And I'm sorry that I couldn't get to you  
And anywhere I would've followed you*

~~~~~

OK, so that was Katie's story, which ends with Nathan's finger pointing in my face and the very consequential question: "What should she do?"

Well, what would you do if you were her? Or if she were your friend, what advice would you give her?

If you feel like she should just suck it up, keep quiet, honor her marriage vows, and accept Matt's absurd excuses – that she has no right to demand an ultimatum, and that Matt has no obligation to comply – well, you probably shouldn't bother reading any further. Or if when you watched the Great Big World video, your first thought was that the girl shouldn't be exposing her belly button and should dress more appropriately, and maybe they shouldn't have been sharing a bed in the first place if they're not married, well then we can't have the next conversation either. Because that sort of distracting judgment – which embarrassingly took me years to shed – bypasses the entire point of the song, and you'll miss the beauty and real heartbreak of its message...in which case you surely won't see any point in my interpretation either. So just click on the little "X" to close this window or throw out the pages with these words printed on them; whatever the case may be, just move on to something else.

If, on the other hand, you feel that Katie should have a voice and that she should stand up for herself and for the truth – that she has every right to put the ultimatum in front of Matt – well then let's put it into context and figure out who we are in this parable.

I've played both roles depicted in the story above: the condescending keeper of secrets and the seeker of answers to secrets that had been kept from me. But I find the most similarities in the role of Katie the jilted lover, who is making some demands of Matt, who symbolizes the LDS Church. So yes, I'm openly admitting that in this story, I'm the naively submissive woman who struggles to find her voice. As far as some of the other associations:

- Matt's history before Katie came into his life is the early church history
- Their early relationship together progresses through my own steps with primary, seminary, and BYU
- The wedding is the endowment ceremony in the temple
- The marriage relationship is the journey of self-discovery that followed while I was raising a family.
- The Facebook photograph could be any combination of Facsimiles 1, 2, or 3 in the Pearl of Great Price.
- Abraham is Matt's sister, Abi.
- And the prostitute is, well – funny as it might sound – that's Hor!

So let's put an alternative dialogue into real terms, paraphrased from real conversations that I've really heard or have really been a part of myself between real Church representatives and a real, faithful member who stumbles across something unexpected:

Church: This is Abraham.

Member: But everyone else is telling me it's Hor.

Church: You mean "everyone" on the Internet? Didn't I tell you not to click on anything that I haven't approved?

Member: Ok, yes, but is it Hor?

Church: Yes.

Member: But you said it was Abraham.

Church: Yes.

Member: But they're more than a thousand years apart.

Church: Yes.

Member: I don't get it.

Church: God works in mysterious ways, just trust me.

Member: OK, but if it's not Abraham, shouldn't you take down the caption on your official homepage saying it is Abraham?

Church: [awkward silence]

Member: Say something.

Church: [more silence]

Member: If you don't take it down, I really don't know how I can trust you.

Church: [nothing]

Member: Say something or I'm walking out!

Church: See ya! Oh, and by the way, after the door hits you in the ass on your way out, can you keep quiet about this Abraham thing?

Former Member: Fine, I'm out of here!

It really wouldn't take much for the erroneously interpreted facsimiles to be removed. The Church webmaster could literally do it with two mouse clicks; the refusal to do so just shows that those who have concerns about discrepancies in the truth don't mean that much to the Church in the first place. Like Matt should have done, just admit it's "the Hor" and let's move on from here!

Instead, the reaction from up the chain to anyone digging around for answers they can't find in the officially sanctioned sources is similar to Matt's misplaced defensiveness: "How dare you look into this! If this gets out, it will damage my reputation!"

My response back is this: "How dare you deny this!" Everyone knows there was some cheating going on, just as Katie couldn't make any sense of Matt's absurdly dismissive explanations even after she and all her friends realized he had been unfaithful. The dichotomy of admitting that it's Hor while still claiming that it's Abraham is what drove me nuts back when I really wanted to believe what I was being told.

So with a few of these substitutions in mind, put yourself back into this story wherever you happen to fit. Hor is just one example I've included here because I thought it made for an amusing homonym, but I could go back through the same story ten more times, substituting ten more of Matt's illicit hook-ups for other topics that disturbed me.

If we go back to the “Say Something” video, when I think about the lyrics in terms of my relationship with the Church, walking away really did tear me up inside. You see, I still love parts of my Mormon experience much in the way that I would imagine Katie would still cherish parts of her time with Matt. The affairs didn’t have to ruin everything; Katie may have stuck around if she had been offered an honest admission and had seen some genuine changes. Likewise, I might have stuck around if I had observed some measure of responsibility for previous mistakes. But the adherence to absurd claims – sticking to your guns with made-up excuses in the face of proof to the contrary – is just too much for me.

I do see my separation from the LDS Church as being very similar to a hard break-up. In this case, it’s a break-up in which you still love your ex and value the experiences you shared together, but you just can’t take them seriously anymore or trust them on their other claims, at least not until they fess up and explain the things they’ve been caught red-handed with. When the apologetics are laced with lies, it sure makes the distant chance of any potential resolution seem incredibly remote.

While I was trying to figure out how to keep the relationship going, I found myself with a day off during a business trip to New Zealand. I drove to the aptly named suburb of *Temple View* and found an LDS meetinghouse with its doors open. I wandered into the empty chapel and sat down at the piano by myself, playing primary songs that really tore at me. Some people decide to leave the Church and can simply say *good riddance*. For me, this was no easy decision; I did not want the relationship to end, and going through primary songs really drilled in the implications related to my own kids.



In particular, I struggled to resolve an intensely spiritual experience from just a few months before, when my children and I held a private meeting with LDS apostle Dale Renlund, a retired cardiologist who had specialized in heart transplants during his career. I had tried my best to explain my son’s terminal, inoperable, congenital heart condition to him, and he asked our permission to pronounce an apostolic blessing on his head. At the time of our meeting, I believed that he bore the same priesthood mantle as Matthew, Mark, and Luke, with the same authority as Peter, James, and John. I believed that, as a special, personal witness of the Savior himself, he could act as an instrumental stand-in for the Lord. Here was one of the few people on the planet who could possibly

comprehend just how complex my son's rare combination of complications actually was, and at the same time he was one of just a handful of sustained seers on earth, acting in his role not just as a representative of Jesus Himself but also representing the prophetic guidance of the heart surgeon who would soon be at the helm of the Church. The fact that we happened to find ourselves in the same room with him half a world away from Salt Lake City seemed miraculous. Although I was already struggling to accept literal interpretations of the scriptures at that point in my life, I still clung to the notion that God could anoint mouthpieces with the same sealing power as the ancient prophets. His blessing, I believed at the time, could seal the will of God.

Hearing the optimistic words about my son's future that he spoke during the blessing had me in tears. It would be very easy for someone unacquainted with the physiological implications to express hope for the future, but knowing that he fully understood why the best surgeons on the planet had deemed the case inoperable, the words of hope baffled me, while his confidence strengthened me.

It was an intensely spiritual experience; to this day I would still call it sacred. Some people who walk away from the church end up recording personal interviews and other private conversations and putting them online for others to mock or scorn. In some cases, those efforts have provided well needed transparency around questionable practices. But in this case, even if I had a recording of Elder Renlund's prayer, to this day I wouldn't put it out there to subject it to ridicule. Regardless of where I stand on matters of religious exclusivity, if a Muslim or a Jew or a Hindu or a Buddhist stepped through their own sacred rites with a genuine concern for my son's well-being, I would not want to undermine those efforts or make light of them; I would let them stand. Regardless of my conclusions about Joseph Smith's escapades in another century, I still believe in the sincerity of Dr. Renlund's words, and I have every sense that he cared deeply about my son's well-being.

This experience was fresh in my mind as I wandered the chapel halls and looked at the paintings of the First Vision, the restoration of the priesthood, and other iconic symbols of Mormonism. Is it possible to choose which ones to retain and which ones to discard? Can I keep the primary songs and throw out the papyrus? Can I bank on the continuity of Elder Renlund's priesthood power while disavowing the race-based exclusions of the past?

I found myself waffling in the same way that Katie second-guessed herself in the preceding story. I really wanted to trust that the apostolic mantle was meaningful and real, ignoring the accusations and doubting my doubts. I wanted to stay. I was comfortable there. Mormonism had been my identity and my community since childhood. If I gambled wrong on this one, I feared for my own son's well-being. If there was the slightest chance, even one in a hundred odds, that my own priesthood could help heal my son, I would walk through the motions of retaining, protecting, and sustaining it for the rest of my days.

But were the promised blessings related to my son in some way contingent on my own actions? Was this just a deal between my son and his creator, where my own direction in life had nothing whatsoever to do with the outcome? So many blessings in Mormonism are tied into obedience and adherence that I had a habit of automatically associating a blessing's results to *righteousness*, whether or not that was actually said in the blessing at the time. Could the promised results be undone by my own actions, my lack of faith, or my deviant path? If anything went wrong, I certainly did not want to find myself in the position of wishing I still had the mantle of the priesthood and blaming myself for an inability to intervene on God's behalf. So if this was something I was going

to discard from my life, I had better be damn sure I haven't tied the expectation of a positive outcome into my own adherence to the rules and rituals of Mormonism.

By the time I found myself wandering around Temple View, I had gone further down the road with the dominoes than when we had sat in the room with Elder Renlund. I realized that the origin story for his priesthood authority was canonized in print just a few pages after the facsimiles that I knew were fake. I wanted to be able to separate them, discarding the facsimiles while still believing that the authority to speak for God had carried through to our day.

I didn't know how to resolve this dichotomy, but I had already spent a few hours in the chapel without getting any closer to an answer. So I stood up and walked out the door to continue my search for guidance. The instant I stepped outside, I laughed out loud and said, "You've got to be freaking kidding me!" Here is what I saw:



No lie – this is the actual photo taken at that actual moment! I guess God does work in mysterious ways! My temple recommend was almost expired, and I had no intention of renewing it, knowing that I could no longer answer questions about the myth of Mormon exclusivity in the affirmative. Maybe I had no business being there at all, but given the beckoning sign from above, I decided to go inside the temple and see if I could somehow harness the memories and latch onto my former convictions to get a second wind.

I wandered around and found a couch to sit on; as I looked around at the Book of Mormon scenes on the wall, I had the distinct impression that the tales were as made up as the origin story for the hobbit-holes I had just seen earlier in the day. Try as I might, I could not bring myself to draw a line that would separate fact from fiction in the Mormon saga. That doesn't mean people today can't do good things while adhering to an illusion, but I, for one, have no place there. It felt surreal that Joseph Smith's ability to translate – or rather his *inability* to translate – had cascaded through a two-century chain reaction that culminated in me finding my own truth at the end of a rainbow near Hobbiton. So instead of a second wind, it just felt like I had reached the finish line of this particular race; I acknowledged that I was probably seeing the inside of a temple one last time before I would be locked out for good.

Even though it felt like closure as I walked out the big double doors and got back into my rental car, I still had to decide whether to opt for a divorce or a temporary separation with the off chance of a future reconciliation. Should I stay friendly and inactive, withdraw and resign, or make a stink from the inside until I face a church court under threat of excommunication? I am an engineer, and I tend to make decisions with my head, weighing out numerical costs and benefits. In this case, even after my head was convinced, I knew this decision had to be made in complete harmony with my own heart. Whatever road I decided to take, given Elder Renlund's blessing, I knew I had better be absolutely sure of my path: Not with the kind of surety I thought I possessed during my mission days when I would try to convince others to join the movement; and not with the kind of surety with which believers who only read official material profess their knowledge; I knew in this case any lack of reasonable doubt would need to be thoroughly examined and investigated like a capital case. But in the end, it also needed to *feel* right.

Could there be beauty and life lessons in a speech attributed to King Benjamin if Joseph Smith made him up? Can a Jew or a Christian find beauty in Isaiah's words if much of what has been historically attributed to him actually belongs to one of his anonymous deutero-personalities? When parables are introduced as parables, we're free to draw lessons from them. But what if that introductory designation is removed? Does the story that some readers take literally lose its value once we realize it is fictitious? How *literal* does a story have to be in order to draw a lesson from it? I think there are plenty of lessons to be learned from stretched stories, as long as the stretch is acknowledged. So could I learn some lessons about how I ought to proceed on my own spiritual path by inserting myself into my own parables? I decided to run with that idea and embarked on a story-writing journey for myself before making my final choice. If you look at the length of this book, the process obviously took me a while, but again, I wanted to be sure. Eventually, after stepping through enough of these stories, I concluded that the honesty and behaviors that I needed to see in a partner were just plain missing. I really, really wanted to stay...but I just couldn't. Much like Katie may have wanted to feel safe in Matt's arms, her belief that he had set the fire and covered up his role in it thwarted her ability to sense any comfort in that embrace.

I believe in Elder Renlund's conviction – at least in his belief in his own conviction. But I'm also convinced that he's wrong about Abraham and Moroni and angels with flaming swords who coerce young girls into non-consensual pairings. I say that with an acknowledged lack of an absolute knowledge – which doesn't even exist anymore in my life's lexicon – but I've done my homework, and I'm comfortable stating that conclusion as a fact that is just as obvious to me now as the fact that gravity falls and heat burns. I would not gamble my son's life away on a hunch – not without exploring every last tenet of my own conviction.

I wanted it to be true. But it's not. I wanted Elder Renlund's blessing to be prophetic – to be a product of his role as a seer – but it's not. It is still special in my book, but his role as a seer is a product of Joseph Smith's imagination, just as Commander Crowe and the Shamanites are products of mine. Joseph Smith himself defined the role of a seer to include the ability to translate ancient languages without having been educated in those languages. That is a gift that was never effectively demonstrated back in his day, and as far as I can tell, it has never even been attempted in the last century and a half – with or without superstones. Perhaps there's another role in which a *seer* can see the future. Did Elder Renlund see that I would still have my son with me today, a blessing that medical practitioners had told us was not in the cards for us? Maybe so. But if he did, I am convinced that it would be *in spite* of Joseph Smith's claims and not *because* of them.

Everyone sees what they want to see in the signs around them, just as I sensed peace and closure for myself at the end of the rainbow. Others may have taken that as an affirmation of what

was inside the elusive pot, seeing it as a sign to stay. I may look back on it differently someday; but if there is to be any hope for a future together, a few simple, missing steps would be needed to start the process. I'm not holding my breath, though. In the face of Katie's ultimatum, I still wouldn't expect Mateo to suddenly pull down the picture, because I don't think Katie meant as much to him as his need to be right. But perhaps someday somebody who does mean something to him will issue the same challenge, and maybe he'll change for them. By that time Katie may be long gone, whether happily single or in another committed relationship. Maybe she will wish him well, or maybe she'll shake her head, realizing that she should have woken up to the tell-tale signs much earlier. These are some of the optional paths I see ahead when I look in the mirror and recognize her story.

In my case, the man who formulated the pages of my scriptures was caught cheating, just like Mateo. I realize my concerns don't mean much to those at the helm of the church; they are dismissed with absurd rationalizations and gaslighting techniques that point to my own guilt in bringing them up. The fake story with Hor photoshopped into a prophet's role was published as truth even after leaders realized it was wrong. The same person who made that initial swap claimed to have passed a line of authority from Jesus himself down to a latter-day room where a latter-day heart doctor placed his latter-day hands on my latter-day son's head and invoked that latter-day authority in the latter-day apostolic blessing he pronounced. I would love for that to be a thing. But if you can't admit the things that we know are wrong, how can I be expected to believe the things that nobody can prove one way or another, no matter how much I want them to be true?

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What would you call a relationship without mutual accountability? Some would call it one-sided; others might say abusive, or the real truth might lie somewhere in between. I'm not telling everyone they should just walk away like I did. But I am saying everyone has a basic human right to demand accountability from any organisations they are a part of. As for me, my requests for explanations of indiscretions were met with silence, and I decided I had a right to an ultimatum.

If you suspect your spouse is cheating and he or she tells you not to listen to what anyone else says, to only trust what he or she is telling you, and, in fact, to stop talking to any others altogether, would you comply? Or would you dig a little deeper? And if they were caught cheating, what if they deny, deny, deny while they believe they can get away with it? (To me that's analogous to the pre-Internet Church.) And then, when faced with the actual, irrefutable evidence, what if they acknowledge the actions but with excuses and alibis that make no sense, then refuse to confront the accusations by saying, "Just trust me," and subsequently change the subject? (To me that's analogous to the post-Internet Church.)

When someone is accused of an indiscretion, and finally they say, "Yes, I acknowledge the evidence, but not the wrong-doing itself," what does that mean? What if they say, "I know it doesn't make any sense that I did that, but to me it makes perfect sense, and if you just look into your heart, you'll understand, too"? What does it tell you when they offer no reasonable explanation or apology for their actions and refuse to set the record straight? Like Katie, I didn't want this break up. Mormons seem to assume that those who leave do so because they want to partake of the worldly ways; in my case I was perfectly happy in my naïve little bubble; I didn't want a beer, or an affair, or my Sundays off. I actually felt an intense need for that community. But now that I'm armed with the evidence that exposes the unfaithfulness of my former partner, it doesn't really matter what I want. Maybe I'm missing something with my accusations; I do have to admit that. Like Matt's excuses about deviant secret agents who are forcing his hand, maybe he really did want to protect Katie and everyone else. Maybe he didn't set that fire. Maybe the world's oldest document was in Joseph

Smith's hands and burned up in the Chicago Fire, leaving only misleading traces of fraudulent translations to test the fortitude of sceptics. Plausible? If I can borrow Wayne Campbell's elegant imagery, perhaps it's remotely possible in a rectal monkey sort of sense. But probable and worth gambling your life on? Fat chance!

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Pathological Liars Anonymous

From what I've made up about Matt here – standing in for the LDS Church and its apologists in particular – how would you picture him behaving if he were sent to an addicts meeting for chronic liars? In that setting, I picture him sitting around the circle: he stands up when the chairperson calls on him and says, "Hi, I'm Mateo el Dies. Please don't use my first name; it makes me uncomfortable. Just call me Brother el Dies."

"Hi LDS," the other attendees answer in unison.

"Well, I used to have a problem with lying," Matt says.

"Are you currently fighting this inclination?" the chairperson asks.

"Listen, even though it looks like I've had some problems in my past, those who accuse me of having had these problems are all out to get me, and they're all liars and deceivers themselves. I've always been right, I didn't inhale, I don't lie, and in fact, I cannot lie. God wouldn't allow it. Unless it's for your own good. Then he lets me lie; in fact, he tells me to lie. Which technically means it's not really a lie after all since I'm just following orders. So you see, I am not a liar and never have been."

Then one of the other support group members says, "But wait a second, didn't we just catch you in a lie last week?"

Matt's defensive response is, "Hey, don't point your fingers at me. Let's talk about old man Roman sitting across from me! We should all be pointing at him, since he's actually been convicted of perjury in the first degree. I haven't been lying for nearly as long or as hard as he has. So let's focus on him instead, OK? Relative to him, my lies are actually the most correct truth on Earth! And I'm all about the truth!"

With that, I would hope the chairperson would just send Matt and his trumped-up delusions home, telling him to come back when he's less deranged and ready to admit that he has a problem. Let's face it: We all know the Church has had a chronic history of covering up its history in the past, but the process of healing that tendency can still begin with a little honesty and transparency going forward. Unfortunately, as it stands, Church leaders don't even seem to want to start the process of fixing things, because there is very little acknowledgment of any current issues, only claims that the problems have been fixed already. So how about we start with Hor and see where it goes from there?

If you're a friend of Matt's, and if as his friend you accept his stories, believing that Katie has no reason to feel hurt because she hasn't been betrayed at all, how should you then treat Katie, especially if she is your friend as well? I admit to my LDS friends and family that I may have missed the mark on this altogether. But if I am Katie in this story, please realize that regardless of the truth about Matt, her pain is real; she believes she has been cheated on, and she needs to know that her friends acknowledge that, regardless of how they feel about Matt. And that's all I have to say about that...Matt.



An Unexpected Journey

← → ↻ 🏠 [churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/pgp/abr/fac-1?lang=eng](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/pgp/abr/fac-1?lang=eng) ☆

THE CHURCH OF
JESUS CHRIST
OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS

Scriptures and Study ▾ Families and Individuals ▾ Share the Gospel ▾ Inspiration and News ▾ Serve and Teach ▾



THE BOOK OF ABRAHAM

TRANSLATED FROM THE PAPYRUS, BY JOSEPH SMITH

A Translation of some ancient Records that have fallen into our hands from the catacombs of Egypt. The writings of Abraham while he was in Egypt, called the Book of Abraham, written by his own hand, upon papyrus.



A FACSIMILE FROM THE BOOK OF ABRAHAM EXPLANATION

Fig. 1. The Angel of the Lord.

Fig. 2. Abraham fastened upon an altar.

Screen grabs from the official LDS Church website containing acknowledged falsehoods

My Reality: Say Anything!

"I was Mormon when I wrote this, forgive me if it goes astray" – Prince (well, sort of...)

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In various biblical analogies involving marriage, Jesus, the gospel, the church, or its members are alternately referred to as either the bride or the bridegroom. In the Catholic Church, both nuns and priests are regarded as being ‘brides of Christ’, and some wear a type of wedding ring to symbolize their devotion. Whatever part each partner plays in Christian parables, the marriage itself is a ubiquitous symbol for a committed, exclusive relationship between two consenting parties.

The scary thing about using an LDS Church member’s relationship with the Church as an analogy to marriage is that in LDS culture, devotion to the Church can often supersede devotion to one’s spouse. Turning Katie’s ultimatum around, what if a temple-going Mormon is given an ultimatum to choose between a non-believing spouse and the Church? Should they choose to break the marriage covenant or the baptismal covenant? Some may disagree, but the overall impression I’ve taken from the cases I’ve seen is that a partner can be replaced, but the gospel cannot; so in the eyes of the Church, perhaps this roll of the dice falls against the spouse who has issued the ultimatum.

In the event of an ultimatum, however, the *ultimate* blame is likely to be placed on the partner who is demanding such an impossible choice. I mean, who would ever force someone to make such an awful decision in the first place? Can’t both partners just keep freely doing what they love and pursuing their personal beliefs while staying devoted to each other? Why should dropping the church ever be put forward as a condition for remaining married? Surely only a malicious, selfish person would force an ultimatum, in which case good riddance to the conniving spouse!

Well, in truth, those sorts of ultimatums *can* be issued in love and without any manipulation whatsoever. I could cite one episode of the *Mormon Stories* podcast after another to back up that statement. When one spouse loses their faith in the Church, but the other retains theirs, a strict interpretation of LDS doctrine and scripture may have the believer *believing* they have lost their shot

at celestial glory now that the temple sealing has essentially been nullified by a covenant-breaking spouse. Now you don't have to go cheating on a spouse to break those covenants; one of those covenants involves ceding all you are and all you have to the Church; a non-believing spouse can't possibly comply with that promise even if they go on paying tithing to keep the believing portion of their household temple-worthy. So the non-believing and now covenant-breaking spouse may realize in that instance that they cannot possibly provide the believing spouse with what they need to achieve exaltation, which is the end goal of all end goals in Mormonism. So should they just call it quits? I have friends who have gone that route and have been advised that the sacrifice they are making is really a sign of true love, which becomes merely an afterthought as they split up...and the believing spouse seeks a more perfect union with a partner with more promising celestial potential.

Having been armed with the imagery of Mormon folklore like *Saturday's Warrior* or *My Turn on Earth* since childhood, I felt bonded to the LDS Church in a way that I saw as being stronger than any marriage certificate – civil or otherwise. A testimony is presented as the greatest treasure a mortal can possess, and the greatest work on earth comprises bringing your former friends to the fold. If anything stands in the way of that vision, “some dreams must wait to come true,” as one of the final numbers in these musicals concludes. Well, I've had to re-educate myself on my own priorities in the meantime, but I do understand those who choose the Church over their spouse when they've considered all of the heart-felt wants, needs, and beliefs of their partner – in light of their own expectations of eternal entry requirements. That choice does not necessarily have to involve anger and resentment; it can be based on love and mutual understanding. But it is an unnecessarily painful process that exists solely because of farcical claims of exclusivity.

Likewise, when I put an ultimatum in front of the Church, I do it knowing that I have needs that aren't being met. Church leaders can choose to meet those needs, or they can choose to proceed without me. In this case, I am confident they will choose the latter. But I do feel that a member of the Church has just as much right to put forward an ultimatum as a cheated-on spouse. Just like Katie has the right to tell her husband to take his photo with the hooker [sorry, I haven't found a synonymous term that isn't equally offensive...] off his Facebook page, every Mormon has the right to tell Church leaders to take Hor off its books. Or else! ...or else what?

Like a dissatisfied spouse who keeps quiet when the kids are held as collateral, refusing to see the terms of an ultimatum through in the end, I've known Mormons who keep their concerns to themselves because they fear that speaking up might get them blacklisted from the celestial guest list.

For someone who believes that Church leaders hold a sealing power than can revoke every key to the kingdom – and that their salvation is tied into their standing in the Church – what can they do with their concerns? Of course, there are officially prescribed protocols for airing grievances, but what should a faithful, practicing Mormon do when those channels have been exhausted, and the requests for honesty have been met with silence or never even made it past the Bishop's office? Based on my own experience, I get the impression that you're supposed to turn it off and go about your business quietly, taking those concerns to the grave with you – where you'll get your answers soon enough!

If excommunication is equivalent to eternal, spiritual death, those dissidents who have been excommunicated can serve as severed heads on the stakes – ominous warnings to those who might think about following suit. But the substitution of a single, figurative domino for its rock-solid counterpart – be it an exonerating angel with a sword, an uninspired racial ban, a mistaken piece of

papyrus, or the non-existence of Zeph himself – renders the whole stack of dominoes entirely harmless, right along with the benign consequence of running the chain to its conclusion.

Well, let's consider the conditions that I have at my disposal in the overwhelmingly likely event of the Church's non-compliance with my requests. I'm not a big fan of blackmail, infiltration, coercion, or other forms of manipulation, so the only thing I'm comfortable using as a threat for the flip side of an ultimatum is my own membership status in the Church. Like Katie's threat of walking away from her former partnership, that's the only weapon in my arsenal that I'm comfortable using. And in this case, I'm under no delusion that my personal concerns would ever see the inside of the HQ mail room, passing through the sentinels who triage the appeals of wounded veterans. My supposed battle wounds are seen as mere scratches that a few band-aids ought to fix; so I understand my little diatribe is like threatening a tank with a peashooter. But if there were ever enough peashooters out there – or if some trending Mormon celebrity in possession of a super-duper pea shooter were to take aim as well – the tank might just get bogged down in the pea soup.

As a missionary, I was taught an important tactical skill that I never quite mastered myself: Do not beat around the bush with your challenges. The idea is to ask people direct questions that can only be answered with a *yes* or a *no*. The prescribed Missionary Guide called them "will you" questions.

I might have a big wish list associated with my decades as a practicing Mormon, but for now I'll start with just three demands that I'll list as challenges to the LDS Church. I'll phrase them here in the form of missionary-compliant *will-you* questions:

1. *Will you* remove the facsimiles from the lds.org website and future editions of the printed scriptures?
2. *Will you* release an official statement acknowledging that the racial ban was not inspired?
3. *Will you* rescind the November 2015 policy?

I'm assuming I'll never receive a personal response to these requests, and that if any of these ever did make their way to the top, the answer would be a succinct *no* to the third power. So what's my alternative? There might be a whole range of options for others with more prominent roles in Church leadership, but I'll keep it simple and include three post-dated resignation letters, each of which constitutes the only threat I can make from my position of relative obscurity.

Missionaries know full well that no commitment is complete without a date, so if we're going to set a timeframe, let's call it quits one year from today, January 1, 2018, which should allow plenty of time to debate and either approve or deny these proposed policy changes. These renunciations wouldn't need to involve excessive planning or deliberation; in fact, these three changes could all be made in one fleeting, 60-second public service announcement during a general conference address. Total monetary cost: zero dollars! Bang for your buck: Priceless!

I am including the letters below as form letters for others to copy and paste if they so desire. Assuming there will be no budging on these hard lines within a year, I would be entirely comfortable resigning my own membership in accordance with the terms stated in the letters, but I realize it may not be so easy for others. If, for example, you believe that your church ordinances are sacred rites that are required for admission through the pearly gates, please don't go committing the cardinal sin of dropping your Church membership in protest of anything at all. A resignation cancels those rites, after all, and nobody deserves to live under the threat of feeling like they are doomed to FOMO telestial hell, even if it is for a stand worth taking. Those subscribing to that viewpoint could perhaps threaten something less than revoking covenants, like paying tithing on net instead of gross income.

I want no part in trying to convince anyone with a believing mindset to act on these ultimatums. Figure out how to drop the mindset first, then figure out which ultimatum you'd wish to tackle. If you're still deciding where you stand, follow the path to its conclusion before doing something drastic that could end up landing you in a depressive guilt trip.

If you adhere to the program, mailing one of these letters off would be a capital crime as far as your newly condemned soul is concerned. You would become the hand trying to steady the ark, and we all know how that story ends! Better not touch it! If you then followed through with your ultimatum and returned your all-access pass to the kingdom while still believing in the covenants you have made, you may end up living the rest of your life guilt-ridden for an unpardonable offense. There has been a lot of overdue talk about how shaming youth who have had sex can mess kids up big time while they try to navigate life with that guilt in tow. If being told they have committed #3 on the all-time list of the world's most horrific crimes fills their soul with perceived darkness, how about moving up to #1 on that list? You felt the spirit, then denied it with your murmuring! By some interpretations of the big three, that is the most unpardonable one altogether. With your resignation letter, you've let the swine gobble up that precious priced pearl, leaving it in a stinking pile of manure that you're now throwing back in your heavenly father's face. I don't invoke that imagery in jest, but rather from the perspective of having heard similar Sunday school analogies that were intended as incentives to stay the course.

If you're worried about the covenants you have made or the contracts that bind you, rest assured, they were breached long before you ever walked this earth. Just like Katie could have let herself off the hook back on the day that her so-called husband Matt first hooked up with Abi's look-a-like, the alleged deal with the Church membership department has been invalid from the get-go. Joseph Smith's crimes against his housekeeper landed him on his own top three list long before it was printed in your scriptures. By the time Joseph Smith made up tall tales about the Prophet Onendagus or tried his hand at translating the forged Kinderhook plates, the illegitimate membership contracts of his adherents had already become null and void, even if those running the Church's printing presses managed to suppress the details over the years – that is, of course, until the world wide web raised them from the deep for the world to see!

So if my own testimony has any validity anymore, I'll assert to anyone challenging the system that you'll be just fine, even if your ordinances are revoked. You have violated nothing by demanding some change. So if you end up coming to the conclusion that Mormonism is made up, or if you are a part of the subculture of meta-Mormons who walk through the motions while perhaps debating when to finally resign, why not make a stink and try to effect a change in the process? Unless there is some other rush for pushing it through, there's no harm in stalling it out by a year with an ultimatum just to see where it goes. If your membership happens to stay intact because Church officials end up complying with the requests, well, you may want to consider whether you'd be willing to keep staying on the books at that point...or move on to your next ultimatum. At least you'd know you were part of something that effected a positive change!

I confidently call these changes positive, because I believe each one of these concessions would open up further doors for equality and for intellectual freedom, including the freedom to choose which leaders to follow and which ones to ignore. That sort of selection process is seen as a negative thing in the church: "You can't just cherry pick what's palatable from the menu," I've heard in one Sunday school analogy after another, "ignoring the items you don't like just because they're uncomfortable."

“The truth isn’t supposed to be comfortable,” the argument continues, “Jesus said he comes with a sword, right?”

Well, some truths may be uncomfortable, but to me trying to officially uphold these three lies – among others – is much more uncomfortable than any scenario without them. When menu items are indigestible and just plain wrong, like the racial ban, the November Policy, and Hor’s fake ID, well then yes, they ought to be severed with a sword and discarded forever! Every day Mormons reject ideas like blood atonement and the deity of Adam, so why not add these extra falsehoods to the mix? There is perhaps a fear that these requested concessions would implicate those in the chain of succession who preached about their divinity along the way (which, by the way, is every single one in the line-up). And you know what? The church would survive just fine! We selectively reject *selected* racist statements made from the Tabernacle pulpit with the current First Presidency’s blessing. So why not *selectively* set a few more truths straight?

Let’s take evolution as an example of one issue where Mormons have been able to overcome backtracking as well as a standing difference of opinion. The evils of evolution were derided from the pulpit and in official publications by a chain of prophets, seers, and revelators. Nowadays we know that former prophets were wrong about the wholesale denial of the evolutionary process. Even those staunch literalists who continue to believe that mankind was dropped onto the planet in pure, perfect form tend to take medicines that are crafted to combat *evolving* viral or bacterial strains. But nobody these days seems to be walking out of the church over the former errors of ignorance about cell mutations. One person can sit in a Sunday school class believing evolution is false; another can sit in the same Sunday school class believing it is true; each can cite a prophet to back up their case, and they can sit next to each other and get along just fine with no need for a disciplinary council. Your estimate of the number of zeroes in the age of the earth, be it thousands, millions, or billions of years, doesn’t figure into your worthiness interview; yet your rejection of misidentified hieroglyphs or Israelite heritage for Native Americans makes you an outcast?

Why can’t participation in the Mormon community include an acceptance of metaphorical interpretations of documents with questionable authenticity and – if not genuine acceptance – at least tacit tolerance of a belief in the fallibility of leaders who have instituted flawed guidance in the past? I believe the three issues I’ve chosen to highlight here – from among hundreds of other potential requests for transparency – would open the door to a less judgmental and exclusive community.

Perhaps there is a fear that those with more liberal beliefs might begin to ostracize the steadfast literalists if all mindsets were given equal time in the open forum of a Sunday school class or testimony meeting. Over the years, a wide range of news stories have covered incidents in which those who support discriminatory policies claim to have been discriminated against for expressing their God-given right to hold discriminatory beliefs. Does the intolerance go both ways? In the event that some of these requested changes allow the proverbial worms to irretrievably escape their can of comfort, perhaps there would be mumbled comments from those who can’t understand or respect each other’s mutual beliefs; but could a wider acceptance of unorthodox beliefs result in a more tolerant community in terms of actual, systemic practice?

What if someone believes that an actual human named Adam had his actual rib extracted from his actual ribcage to form an actual woman named Eve? Spencer W. Kimball said that the fable of Adam’s rib is “obviously figurative,” yet some still cling to literal interpretations of the event. Can you imagine a disciplinary council convening to cast out those proclaiming a belief that the

extraction actually happened? It sounds ridiculous, which highlights the systemic tolerance of literal interpretations, even those that are acknowledged by authority to be false. If Adam's rib is so obviously figurative, why not Adam himself? Some are able to draw a line between fact and fantasy, but I'm not one who possesses that degree of discernment. In that light, why not offer tolerance of figurative interpretations that the hard-liners believe to be false?

I understand that's a scary prospect for those with exclusive, literal beliefs in historical authenticity and in the impossibility of any misguidance whatsoever from the top. But what would actually happen if these three suggested changes were implemented? Take an opinion poll, and you'll find that at least the younger generation of Mormons has long since arrived at the conclusion that the ban was wrong, the November policy was misguided, and Hor...well, I'm keeping that one in as a personal pet peeve of mine, but nobody actually cares about hieroglyphs these days, so that one's a wash with today's youth!

So I'll start by giving it a try with three generic, copy-and-pasteable letters that I am mailing off to the LDS Church headquarters, with my own details included in the form fields. I invite others to do the same. Here we go:

[DATE]

[NAME]

[ADDRESS]

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints  
Office of the First Presidency  
47 East South Temple Street  
Salt Lake City, UT 84150-5310

Attn. Russell M. Nelson

Re. Canonic correction

Dear President Nelson,

My printed scriptures and the [www.churchofjesuschrist.org](http://www.churchofjesuschrist.org) website include an admitted error in which an ancient Egyptian named Hor is misidentified as Abraham.

In the Gospel Topics Essay on the subject, several theories have been offered as to why Hor has been misidentified; regardless of the reasoning behind the error, the explanation contained in the Book of Abraham is absolutely incorrect.

In that light, I formally request that the facsimiles be removed from the official website and from future printed editions of the Pearl of Great Price. Alternatively, please correct the captions to reflect the actual meaning of the characters as unanimously accepted by both LDS and non-LDS scholars with expertise in the subject.

I cannot ask my missionary-age children to distribute an erroneous text while proclaiming its truth. The purported translations are untrue, and things that are untrue should have no place in canonized scripture.

A refusal to correct the known error constitutes a breach of my membership terms. As such, I have attached a post-dated resignation letter. One year from today, on [DATE], I will log onto the church website and navigate to the Pearl of Great Price on the scriptures page. If the facsimiles with the false explanations remain, please process the attached request and remove my name from the records of the LDS Church.

If the erroneous captions have been removed in the meantime, I will withdraw my resignation request and take it as a sign that the current organization embraces truth over reputation. Please discard the attached letter if the errors are corrected in the meantime.

Sincerely,

[Signed]

[Name]

Encl. Resignation letter

[DATE]

[NAME]

[ADDRESS]

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints  
Office of the First Presidency  
47 East South Temple Street  
Salt Lake City, UT 84150-5310

Attn. Russell M. Nelson

Re. Systemic racism

Dear President Nelson,

The Gospel Topics Essay on Race and the Priesthood includes the following statements:

“Today, the Church disavows the theories advanced in the past that black skin is a sign of divine disfavor or curse.”

“Church leaders today unequivocally condemn all racism, past and present, in any form.”

As far as I am aware, the introduction and implementation of the racial ban has not been condemned in the same manner as the reasons for the ban, leading some Church members to still consider the ban to have been inspired.

Some of the now-decried reasons for the ban were cited by the same man who introduced the ban itself; to claim that one was inspired while the other is condemned defies all logic and principles of equality.

In that light, I formally request that an official statement be issued to the body of the Church stating that the ban was not inspired.

Because of Brigham Young’s complicit role in this and other erroneous, racist teachings, I cannot keep his name on my professional profiles unless the entirety of his racist teachings are rescinded and disavowed, including his implementation of the ban itself.

Although I graduated from the university bearing his name, I have deleted the name from my resume, and call on other graduates to do the same until this change is made. A refusal to issue the statement indicates an official stance that the ban was of God, which is a tenet I cannot accept.

If a statement disavowing Brigham Young’s ban has not been issued within one year of today, [DATE], please process the attached, post-dated resignation letter and remove my name from the records of the LDS Church.

If a statement condemning the priesthood ban is issued in the meantime, I will withdraw my resignation request and take it as a sign of progress. Please discard the attached letter in that event.

Sincerely,

[Signed]

[Name]

Encl. Resignation letter



[DATE]

[NAME]

[ADDRESS]

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints  
Office of the First Presidency  
47 East South Temple Street  
Salt Lake City, UT 84150-5310

Attn. Russell M. Nelson

Re. November 2015 policy

Dear President Nelson,

The November 2015 policy barring children in same-sex households from ordinances is simply wrong.

I formally request that the policy be rescinded, and that the reasoning behind it be disavowed.

The Doctrine and Covenants states that “all things shall be done by common consent in the church.” The current website reaffirms that approach, stating that “Latter-day Saints continue to conduct Church business by common consent.”

If I were seated in a congregation, and the policy were to be read aloud, followed by the question, “any opposed by the same sign?” I would voice my objection. In this case, nobody asked the membership, but as far as I can tell, the vote is far from unanimous.

I cannot allow my baptismal-age children to join an organization that would withhold saving ordinances from children due to the actions of others within their household. Just like those in same-sex households are being asked to do, I will ask my own children to wait until the age of 18 to decide for themselves whether they wish to be baptized while this policy is in place.

A refusal to rescind the policy constitutes a breach of my membership terms and the law of common consent. As such, I have attached a post-dated resignation letter that will allow the church to operate by common consent without the objection of this member. If the policy is still in place one year from today, on [DATE], please process the attached, post-dated resignation letter and remove my name from the records of the LDS Church.

If the policy has been rescinded in the meantime, I will withdraw my resignation request and take it as a sign that the current organization embraces acceptance over exclusivity. Please discard the attached letter if the policy has been rescinded in the meantime.

Sincerely,

[Signed]

[Name]

Encl. Resignation letter

[DATE]

[NAME]

[ADDRESS]

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints  
Member Records Division  
50 East North Temple, Room 1372  
Salt Lake City, UT 84150-5310

To whom it may concern:

My membership number is [000-0000-0000] and my confirmation date is [DATE].

My full name is [NAME] and my date of birth is [DOB]. My residence address on record is [ADDRESS].

I, [NAME], hereby resign my membership in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, effective [FUTURE DATE].

Please confirm receipt of this request by return mail.

Sincerely,

[Signed]

[Name]

Encl. Conditions of resignation

Even though these letters are addressed to Salt Lake, according to prescribed protocol, the letters would need to be handed to local leaders who can then decide whether to pass them along through authorized channels...at their discretion. I'm not confident either route would land these particular letters on any one of the fifteen decision-making desks in the Church Office Building, but I'll cover my bases with these and try both routes.

The final form letter above ends with a resignation – or perhaps an interim excommunication if it is classified as apostasy in the meantime – so believers who support these causes but wish to retain their church membership may want to replace that last letter with a more benign imposition. Dropping BYU from your social media profiles, for instance, can certainly be done without endangering your soul, so maybe start with that. Withholding tithing contributions might be another alternative approach, but if you still want to see your daughter get married, you may need to square things up every two years!

Is it treasonous for the rank and file to send off letters like this demanding action? There doesn't seem to be an alternative, authorized approach for cumulatively collecting concerns from the masses and sending them up the chain for consideration; the organization simply isn't set up that way. Former general authority Hans Mattson, for example, said his assigned mandate was not to represent the *people to the brethren*, but rather to represent the *brethren to the people*. Although all things must be done "by common consent in the church," the organization has never claimed to be a democracy or an institution that is fueled by grass-roots initiatives. If a member of the Church disagrees with a policy or doctrine coming down from the top, the recommended remedy is to pray about it until it feels right. If it still doesn't feel right, you probably need more humility. Whatever the missing ingredient, the problem lies in your own heart and not with the order itself.

If you find some fault within the Church, pointing it out makes you a fault-finder – by the very definition of the term. But even if you weren't looking for it in the first place, you don't get to ask Church leaders to fix a problem that comes to light; you humbly accept things as they are, or you leave. You are expected to support and comply with officially sanctioned policies while they are in place; you do not get to call for change from the pews if you intend to remain in good standing. Yes, you can voice some benign concerns, and you may be told they've been passed up the chain in an attempt to make you feel better. But when those concerns relate to church-wide doctrines, policies, and procedures, such as my three challenges here, they'll be politely dismissed before the complaint ever clears the local level. The only way these concerns would result in a systemic change is if a huge pile of targeted letters clogged up the Church Office Building's mailroom, and the statistics showed a noticeable, corresponding drop in baptisms or tithing funds. Even then, of course, there's no guarantee of a response; and even in the event of an apparently correlated directive, there would be no official acknowledgment of an association with the pressures of popular demand.

A top-down structure can be very effective in some circumstances – such as wartime – but that approach is also fraught with collateral damage. If you're a general waging a war, for instance, you don't want every foot soldier's opinion on how the war should be fought; you want them to do what they're told when they're told so you can win the war in your own way. Like it or not, that's how militaries are structured. If the commanders want intel from the front lines, they'll commission their operatives to go out and get it; they're certainly not going to take their advice from some short-sighted private in a trench with no clue about the aerial reconnaissance footage. So shut up and do your job, maggot!

That blind adherence is what boot camp is supposed to drill into new recruits; though it sounds cold-hearted, history has shown that it is very difficult to win a battle without instilling that

very effective mindset among the ranks. But on the flip side, the collateral damage of authoritarianism is that you may sacrifice your own troops by ignoring their point-blank observations – intelligence that could well have helped correct an erroneous, deadly command issued from behind an oak desk.

As a foot soldier in this particular theater, I don't expect to get any answer to these challenges other than possibly a request by the local chain of command to cease and desist with any related public statements. No matter; I can walk away just the same, whether or not my voice is ever heard. But I'll claim the right to put this ultimatum out there just as Katie had the right to demand that Matt remove the photo with the false caption.

Why can I confidently say that my individual concerns will be dismissed in this case? Because I am claiming that the misidentification of Hor leads Church members astray; the belief that God willed the racial ban leads Church members astray; and the dragnet of the November Policy leads Church members astray. I believe the changes I am requesting will be denied, because canonized scripture says that the Church is incapable of leading its members astray...which is exactly what I am saying has happened in these letters!

For the head-nodding masses of lay Church members, any apparent straying by *the Lord's anointed* must alternatively be reclassified as a deliberate, Abrahamic test or attributed to God's mysterious ways. As the argument goes, if a prophet has led his people astray, then the scripture stating that impossibility is false; but the scriptures are true, so any statement claiming that the prophet has led people astray is necessarily false. If officially proclaimed policies end up being exposed as misguided in the end, the responsibility for the error lies with those holding the keys; you'll be blessed for having obediently followed the directives in the meantime, even though that's impossible, because it has never happened...even though it has. So we find ourselves at an impasse that defies all logic, with a true and living prophet as the trump card: He's right even when he's wrong!

There are societies out there where a man is legally incapable of being charged with adultery, so if an adulterous act takes place, it must have been the woman's fault. In a similar *imbaling* act, the Mormonistic idea that a *leader* cannot *lead* followers astray automatically makes apostates out of those followers who see the Ship listing or veering off course. Actually, it's fine to observe the phenomenon itself, just don't mention it – at least not publicly! Those who have pointed out dangerous deviations have been thrown off “the Old Ship Zion” in the past, and then when the Captain ended up replicating the recommended adjustments to the course, it was called divine revelation. I call it absolutely bizarre!

Maybe I'll find out I was wrong with some of my assertions, but I've still heard no confession around the proven felony counts, just the convoluted acknowledgment of an occasional misdemeanor that is always accompanied by a lengthy excuse that exonerates the Church. I realize that in the absence of any introspective recognition – just like in Katie's story – the burden of initiating the divorce proceedings rests entirely with me. Perhaps if these letters hit the proverbial fan, I'll be served with papers myself before the trial separation is over, but if there is no observable change or reaction in the meantime, I've consigned to the idea that I will need to file the papers on my own.

This is not an easy breakup; there have been beautiful, transcendent moments that I can't easily discard. I made lifelong commitments with what I saw to be huge consequences in the event of a breach, and I don't take that lightly. The complexities go beyond Katie and Matt's relatively

simple, one-on-one relationship. In my case there are children involved, and I need to think long and hard about whether to give up custody to the Church's youth programs, or whether to fight for it myself. The potential impacts reverberate through all of the mystical generations of time that I can muster in my mind, accompanied by a soundtrack of every spiritual connection I have ever felt.

Breakup songs can go in many directions that tap into a wide range of emotions: anger, jealousy, regret, resentment, relief, disorientation, resolve, and more. Believe me, my mind has scanned them all in figuring out where I stand on the potential dissolution of a longer-than-life-long relationship. We're talking eternal, multi-generational, worlds-without-end, soulmate dreams that have been shattered here. You don't just call that off over spilled milk and strippings, as the pioneer folklore warns. In this case, however, we aren't dealing with trivial indiscretions: People have died defending things that are now no longer defended; doctrines that were publicly attributed to God's will have been simply redefined and dismissed as erroneous cultural influences. The wreckage floating in the wake of these flip flops is far from benign; it includes heartbreak, suicides, shattered families, and broken lives. Like the brothel fire that points to Matt as the culprit, there are allegations of serious transgressions that can't simply be swept away with dismissive excuses, and the fact that any culpability is flatly denied makes it all the more aggravating in light of the overwhelming evidence that implicates the LDS Church in a wide range of cover-ups.

When I was teaching church history lessons from the official church history volumes, I had the right to know that the man who wrote it, B.H. Roberts, believed that the Book of Mormon was made up. Instead, his actual beliefs were buried and erased from the record to keep adherents like me from arriving at the same conclusion. When someone leaves the church, their story can be rewritten to suit the desired narrative. Take Chief Apostle Thomas Marsh, for instance: To this day his story continues to be repeated as a sad example of how trivial matters like milk and cream can lead to apostasy. In reality, Marsh left over objections to the violent eradication campaigns that Mormons instigated against the gentiles who got in their way. Whether or not that stance was justified, it was certainly no trivial matter at the time, but in fables that continue to emanate from the pulpit and get printed in lesson manuals year after year, the loss of his keys to the kingdom is held up as a heavy price to pay for bickering over cream strippings.

In Brigham Young's public derision of Marsh – with Marsh himself in attendance – the Lord's Feline triumphantly gloated about how many young women would prefer him over Marsh, citing Marsh's appearance as evidence that apostasy will leave you old and feeble. Mormonism, on the other hand, had kept the prophet himself contrastingly young and handsome. "I could find more girls who would choose me," he bragged, citing his many wives as evidence of his own prowess. He then continued to humiliate the man who had just begged him for his forgiveness. "Look at him," said the so-called King of Beasts on behalf of the Lord, "I doubt whether he could get one wife." Yes, guys like Brother Brigham can grab women by their bonnets while guys like Marsh are out of luck; that was the prophetic message to the congregation. Well, I've censored some potentially objectionable language elsewhere in this volume, but I would encourage any reader to look up what Brigham Young said on the day...and then please tell me if you can find a better definition of the word *asshole* anywhere in print.

Nobody in the wannabe State of Deseret that day wanted to be Thomas Marsh, felled of his manhood by mere quibbles and niggles. Assuming that's how my own issues with the Church will be portrayed among believers, active Mormons might wonder how I could possibly threaten to leave the Church over such little details.

“What, do you think you’re perfect?” they’ll ask, “We all have faults, including prophets. How can you leave over such minor mistakes, when we’re all prone to make them?”

How could I let something so miniscule as a piece of papyrus, for example, get in the way of my eternal progression? How could I let something that trivial revoke every birthright and priesthood key I might have had, canceling my temple sealing, and making spiritual bastards out of my kids? Well, if I still felt like those were real things, believe me, I simply wouldn’t have the guts to take a stand.

If there were Nephites, I’d stick it out and let these issues slide. Only there weren’t any Nephites, so here we are. As far as mistakes, I’m actually fine with historical missteps; I’ve lived with an awareness of many of the mistakes for a long time, having resolved them in my head, if not my heart, with a wide range of apologetic dismissals. But I’m not leaving over the mistakes; I’m leaving – or at least contemplating my exit – over the continued coverup of those mistakes and the blatant refusal to admit and correct them, which exposes the current mindset within the institution’s leadership...which doesn’t fit my definition of inspiration.

How can I leave over an issue as harmless as a few mistranslations? Well, I’ll turn the question around and ask how I can possibly keep quiet about this? I’m an engineer, so if I look at it from that perspective, how could a structural engineer who finds a fractured keystone keep quiet about the potential collapse of the arch? The keystone of the LDS Church is a translation, after all, no matter which century’s lexicon is twisted to redefine the term *translation*. I could pull any example out of my engineering ethics courses as further illustration: The dam is leaking; the O-Ring is faulty; the nuts holding up the walkway are under-designed! What should you do when you become aware of the defect? Walk away quietly? Or call it out? In this case, I’ve finished my investigation, I’ve reached my conclusions, and I’ve written up my report about the structural deficiencies. But when I turned in my assessment, I was surprised to find that nobody wanted to hear any results that didn’t conclude that the structure was sound. “It’s not a real crack,” I’ve been told, “it’s just been painted to look like a crack, intended to fool all but the most scrupulous inspectors.” Well, I checked it out for myself – thoroughly – and it is in fact a big-ass crack! If you think it’s safe, I guess that’s your prerogative; but as for me, if my voice is going to get ignored anyway, I’m at least getting the hell out from under the arch!

So I’m at a crucial decision point, but to play it safe given the high stakes, I’m opting for a one-year trial separation. Should we go our separate ways when time runs out, I would hope that my ex and I would retain enough mutual respect for each other to avoid constant bashing in the future; but accountability is something I will demand in the meantime. Some may call me out for making demands of God or Christ, throwing me into the same downtrodden cast of duplicate characters who were executed for equivalent crimes in Book of Mormon lore. In this case, I’m not making demands of any being at all; these three requested changes are systemic, institutional matters, and I simply believe that an institution – guided by those at its head – can be pressed into doing the right thing if enough of its members are on board with the proposed progress. Positive change in terms of basic human equity has typically come from the bottom up throughout the Church’s history, but wouldn’t it be refreshing if these three changes – and others like them – occurred independently, before the public pressure, and without the “gift” being given grudgingly? I imagine that is what divine direction would actually look like!

I’m not requesting these changes in order to get people to leave, even though each of the preceding letters comes with that threat; I’m requesting these changes to allow people like me to stay – to stay in a more tolerant and accepting environment that allows scepticism and genuine

questioning and provides a place for people who do not enjoy getting their intelligence insulted by being tasked with promoting proven lies as absolute truth. I haven't found that place within Mormonism so far, but perhaps something along those lines will be carved out in the future, slowing down the rate of those who are abandoning ship.

As it stands, Church leaders continue to refuse to answer difficult questions truthfully, leaving adherents with the ambivalence of being able to blame God's mysterious ways for any discrepancies between historical practices and simple morality. Like Katie when she was left to her own assumptions in the face of Matt's belligerent, unrepentant attitude, sometimes I feel hurt, sometimes I feel angry, and sometimes I just don't care. But for now, I'm still standing outside the entrance with my boombox overhead. The stereo is belting out three requests, but I don't expect anyone to come out and greet me in the driveway. When the song ends a year from today, January 1, 2018, I expect to find myself driving away without the reconciliation of a Hollywood movie ending, because I expect a stubborn refusal to emerge from the vaulted room and face the truth.

*I see the doorway to a thousand churches  
The resolution of all the fruitless searches  
All my instincts, they return  
And the grand façade so soon will burn  
Without a noise, without my pride  
I reach out from the inside*

Well my gradually evolving perspective might be reflected with a slight variation in that last line:

*I reach in from the outside*

In the meantime, my demands are simple enough:

*Say something!  
Say anything!*

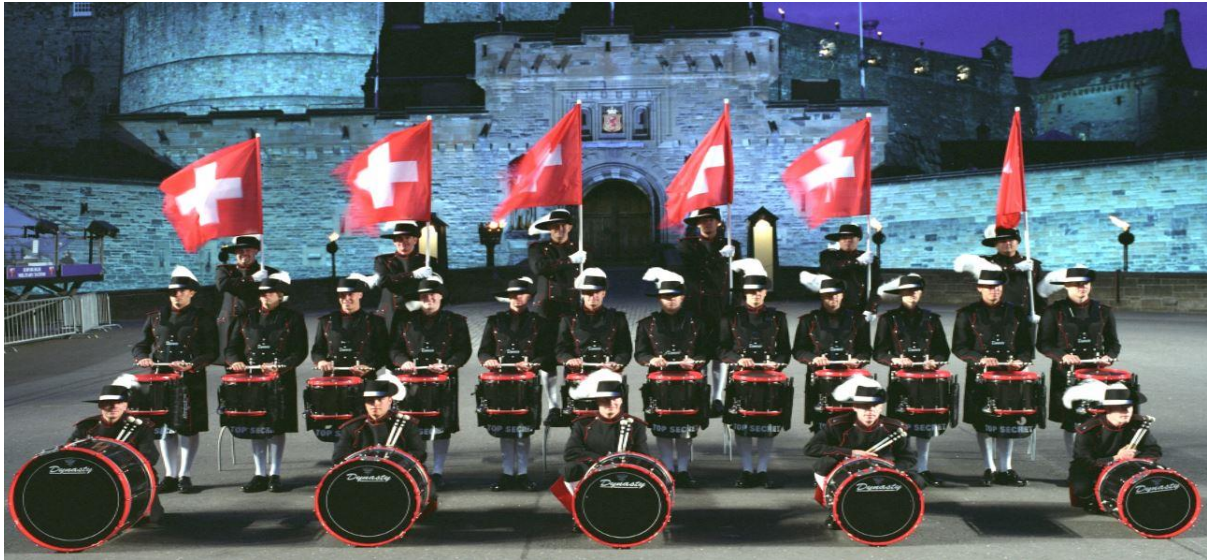


## Chapter 9: Audition

### My Analogy: Top Secret

*“From the point of ignition to the final drive, the point of the journey is not to arrive” – Neil Peart*

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Once again, I’m going to start this analogy out with a true story. When I was about eight years old, our landlord’s teenage son, Berndt, decided to store his best friend’s drum set in the attic above our apartment. I was afraid to ask permission to try it out (since I figured the answer would be “no”) so I snuck up there and played it as quietly as I could, filling in the volume – and all of the other instruments – with my own imagination. From that day forward, I always wanted to be a drummer and hoped for a chance to pursue that dream one day; luckily, a few years later I ended up at a high school with a top-notch music program. We had more band trophies than sports trophies and consistently took top honors at national invitationals and other music competitions around the country.

Our drum line typically led the scores for the rest of the band at these competitions and – at least in my eyes – the drummers carried the marching band through more than one of their championships. OK, so maybe that went to our heads and it was more of a group effort than I remember, but we did work our tails off practicing longer and harder than any other section of the band. In any case, I definitely felt that our trophies were well deserved rewards for our intense, collective efforts.

I come from a long line of drummers – both my father and his father before him played the cadences for military-style marching bands in their day – and I always wanted them to be proud of my own musical accomplishments. For myself personally, the Drummer of the Year trophy I received during my senior year of high school punctuated the years of effort I had spent following their passion for percussion.

The competition became much tougher when I got to college, though, and I really had to step up my game. When it came to the university drum line try-outs, every auditioning drummer had a trophy of their own in their back pocket; that little trinket didn’t mean anything anymore! I spent

hours and hours preparing for my own audition and was thrilled to get an acceptance letter a few weeks after mailing in my audition tape.

It was an exciting new ball game playing in collegiate stadiums, and I felt like I had found my calling in life. But we all shared an even bigger dream than amateur performances. As we traveled to different performances on the marching band's tour bus, we would often watch professional drum corps videos. Actually, now that I think about it, *all* of the video tapes we watched were from the same drum corps: *Top Secret*. If you haven't heard of them, try a quick Google search; I think you'll agree that they are hands-down the best drum corps on the planet – no question about it! I absolutely loved the uniformity of their Swiss precision and – along with every other member of our university drum line – dreamed of joining their ranks one day.

Over the next few years, I watched intently for any openings and finally saw the news of an open audition just before my own college graduation. Getting paid to travel the world with a drum corps seemed like the culmination of my life-long vision. I was only going to have this one chance, though, so I really needed to ace the audition. I called my dad for some advice, and he gave me the phone number for Coach Tommy. Given that Tommy had coached him through his own successful audition, it seemed like a no-brainer to hire him.

Tommy was more than happy to oblige and walked me through the selection process over the phone:

"The audition itself will be held in conjunction with the drum corps world championships at Soldier Field," he said, "It will consist of four parts over four days, each of which will be scored: Learning, practicing, performing, and teaching."

"So what music will we be playing?" I asked.

"Well, that's the trick," Tommy said, "You won't get the sheet music until audition day."

"And how do they score it?" I asked.

"The judge will be watching from the box seats, and you'll be scored on how quickly and thoroughly you can learn the piece from scratch and perform it," he said. With a hint of warning in his voice, he added, "Of course any missteps or missed notes during the performance will be heavily penalized."

He could tell by my silence that this made me a bit nervous.

"But if you execute the routine perfectly," he said, trying to inspire some confidence, "you'll be sure to earn a spot – guaranteed, in fact!"

"But is a perfect routine even possible?" I asked him.

"Don't worry," he said, "we'll train very hard – staying up all night if needed – until you can perform it error-free. The steps will be so ingrained in your muscle memory that you won't even have to think about it!"

I wasn't sure it was possible, but from my own experience, I did know how to work harder than anyone else when it really counted – especially when there was going to be a scoresheet involved!



Day 1: Learn

When audition day arrived, I entered the stadium and was awestruck by its sheer size. I made the mistake of looking up at the box seats, trying to picture what might be going on behind the one-way glass; unfortunately with my eyes pointed upwards, I didn't manage to see one of the instrument bags right in front of my feet.

Next thing I remember, I was lying on my back looking up at the stadium lights.

"You knocked your head pretty hard when you fell," said the voice behind an extended hand, "Hi, I'm Coach Tommy."

I took his hand and he helped me up. Everything seemed foggy, but luckily Tommy had my back. He sat me down at his table on the sidelines and laid out the whole audition plan for me, filling in all of the gaps that I couldn't remember.

He reminded me about Top Secret, and how it had always been my dream to join them. I looked around at all of the other people in the stadium and then glanced up at the box seats.

"This is actually a very special audition," he said, "Herr Doktor Professor Hansli Zermatt, Top Secret's founder, is up there in the box behind the glass!"

Everything was still a bit blurry and confusing, but his explanation for why I had woken up in the middle of a stadium made more sense to me than anything else I could come up with.

"You mean the Founder himself will be judging my performance?" I asked, perhaps a bit awestruck and nervous at the same time.

"Don't worry about anything," Tommy said, "You see this headset I'm wearing?"

I nodded.

"This allows me to stay in direct contact with Herr Zermatt so I can tell you exactly what you need to do along every step of the way."

That sure sounded comforting, especially since a lot of the other musicians seemed to be making random tracks around the stadium without a coach at their side.

“See how they’re all just wandering around aimlessly?” he said, “That’s because nobody else out here has a headset, so they have no idea what they’re even going to be tested on.”

I couldn’t believe my luck! What are the chances that I’d get the only coach with a direct line of communication to the control room? I was sure glad I had Tommy at my side!

“If we get right to work,” he said, “you’ll have the added advantage of a head start!”

With that, he dropped a stack of sheet music on the table, and I pulled my chair up close, thumbing through the sheets. It all looked very confusing, but luckily Tommy was there to explain what it all meant. The musical terms were written in a Swiss dialect – a reformed German of sorts. He translated the terms for me, and I became fully conversant in the use of Achtzehntels, Wirbels and Doppelschlags.

The names sure sounded funny, but he drilled me on the contents over and over again with flashcards until they felt like part of my own vocabulary. It wasn’t long until I had mastered the background theory behind ratamacues, pataflaflas, paradiddles, and even syncopated dragaflamadiddle-diddles. Tommy beamed with pride as I soaked it all in.

With the theory in hand, I went through the sheet music page by page and memorized the whole set, noting every step and every note of the prescribed routine.

At the end of the day all of the candidates were handed a written exam. I finished mine in record time and Tommy took my completed test up to the judge’s office to be graded. I tapped my fingers anxiously on the desk while I waited for my marks, but I wasn’t the least bit nervous. I had answered each question with complete confidence, so when Tommy returned, I wasn’t at all surprised at his response.

“Congratulations,” he said, giving me a big bear hug, “you’ve aced the test!”

“No mistakes?” I asked, wanting to make sure I hadn’t disappointed him in any way.

“Perfect score!” he replied, “In fact, Herr Zermatt himself told me he’s very proud of your achievement today; he’ll be watching your progress very closely over the next few days.”

I felt flattered that the Zermatt actually knew me by name.

“Here’s your Certificate of Achievement for Day 1,” Tommy said, “signed and sealed by the Founder himself.”

Not bad for my first day!

Day 2: Practice

I arrived early for the second day of the audition, anxious to put the theory we had learned into practice. The other candidates had already beaten me to it and had been warming up on their own. Maybe I was in over my head after all.

“Suit up,” Tommy said, pointing to a shipping container that had been placed on the side of the field for instrument storage, “Let’s see what you’ve got!”



The doors were locked, but outside the container was a marching snare with my name on it. When I put the carrier over my shoulders, it felt a bit awkward and didn't fit quite right.

"One size fits all!" Tommy said proudly, "Doesn't that feel great?"

"Not really," I said, shifting it around in an attempt to make it more comfortable.

"Well, if it starts to get irritating while you're playing, just grit your teeth and press on," he said, "It's a great trick because the audience will think you're smiling!"

I gave it my best shot and proceeded through each of the rudimentary warm-up drills on the snare, checking for Tommy's approval with each one. As the day moved on, we combined the individual ingredients into the routine that had been written out in the sheet music. Even though I had been standing in place for hours, I was slowly getting accustomed to the carrier and began to forget how uncomfortable it was.

"Not bad!" said Tommy after the first time through the music, "Now let's start marching!"

Each of the numbers had accompanying marching steps, all guided by the yard lines on the field. I looked down at my designated yard line and started to march toward Tommy while playing the opening bars.

"Eyes on me!" Tommy said.

I tried looking at him but soon veered off course. He blew his whistle and pointed me straight back to my starting position.

Watching the beats and keeping my feet on track at the same time seemed nearly impossible: I could focus on my hands or on my feet or on Tommy, but not on all of them simultaneously! If I zoned in on the music, I'd get into a groove but would stray from my line. If I focused on the line, I could march straight, but I'd start missing beats with my drum strokes. I didn't see how this was going to work at all!

Each time I messed up, he'd send me back to the starting line to try again; and each time I started back into it, the whistle would blow again after a few measures. I didn't think I was ever going to get it right, especially since some of the steps just didn't seem to line up with the music.

“Again!” Tommy ordered.

“But this part doesn’t seem right!” I argued when we got to an awkward bit, “I think there are some mistakes in the music!”

“Can’t be,” replied Tommy, “The Founder himself wrote both the music and the steps. Trust me, it’s right!”

“But...”

“If you get to a part where the music and the steps don’t seem to line up,” Tommy explained, “that’s an intentional syncopation. Any apparent dissonance is by design. It’s really beautiful in its complexity when you think about it.”

“But it just doesn’t seem to jive with the theory we learned yesterday,” I complained.

“Who are you to question the Founder?” Tommy snapped back, raising his voice.

I figured I’d better not push it – he was right after all; what did I know? I couldn’t even remember what happened the day before yesterday!

“You might not understand it now, but it will make sense later,” Tommy said, calming himself down and trying to reassure me, “Just keep doing it over and over again until it feels right.”

I practiced marching toward Tommy in a straight line again and again, with my eyes on his conducting, and we finally made it through the whole routine. Sure enough, once we repeated the routine enough times, it began to feel ok; eventually it felt not just familiar but entirely correct. I could even begin to see some beauty in the parts I couldn’t understand before.

Still, every once in a while I’d feel myself getting into my own groove and I’d break into a solo or wander off course, following my own steps wherever they took me. Each time I deviated from the line, though, I’d be interrupted by Tommy’s whistle.

I had blisters on my hands and my back was aching, but ultimately we got through the day.

“I talked to Herr Zermatt about you,” Tommy said as I put down the drum, “and he’s very concerned.”

I knew I could have done better, so I didn’t have a response for him.

“You showed a lot of promise yesterday, but now he’s not so sure,” Tommy said, “He told me you’ll need to do a better job tomorrow if you want to get in.”

I looked around and saw a few other candidates throwing up their arms and walking off the field.

“Well I did better than them, didn’t I?”

“You see those other guys out there?” Tommy responded, “They show no loyalty to their coach, and a lot of them are giving up on their audition altogether; it’s their only chance and they’ve blown it – what a shame!”

“Maybe they just decided they don’t like this routine,” I remarked, “and want to try something else – or maybe they’d prefer to join a different kind of drum Corps...or even play an entirely different instrument altogether?”

“Don’t kid yourself, kid,” Tommy said, “They’re just being lazy and weak. Everyone wants to be in Top Secret, even if they don’t always remember that fact.”

I nodded.

“Think about it,” he said, “I mean you’ve seen the videos yourself – who in their right mind wouldn’t want to be part of that?”

I shrugged my shoulders.

“The quitters will regret this one moment for the rest of their lives,” Tommy said sternly, “I can guarantee you that!”

Before I could respond, he added, “There will come a day when they would give up everything to have just one more chance.”

“But can’t they try again someday?” I asked.

“Nope, everyone gets one chance and one chance only,” Tommy said resolutely, “By the time they figure that out it will be too late for them. Don’t let that be you!”

“So they just weren’t cut out for it?” I asked, “It just wasn’t meant to be?”

“Precisely – they simply don’t have what it takes,” Tommy said, “If they can’t even make it to the end of Day 2, how do you think they would manage on a world tour?”

“Makes sense,” I mumbled, “...I guess.”

“Well,” said Tommy, “I think it’s time to talk about the big show tomorrow!”

I sat down with him to go through the game plan.

“You’ve managed to squeak by with a pass for Day 2, but I do see some red flags,” Tommy said, “You’re going to have to step it up if you want your spot with the pros!”

I had lost a lot of confidence, and Tommy seemed to take notice.

“Remember, you’re not like those other guys who walked off the field,” Tommy said, trying to cheer me up, “Plus, you’ve got another advantage going for you, too.”

I wasn’t sure what he was getting at.

“Due to your long family tradition with the drum corps and their contribution to Top Secret’s success,” he said, “I have the Founder’s personal guarantee that as long as you don’t stray off the line tomorrow, you can have this ticket that guarantees you a spot.”

I reached for the ticket in his hand to have a look for myself.

“Sorry,” he said, “I can’t show it to you just yet.”

He put the ticket back into his pocket and swore me to secrecy about this little advantage. It didn’t seem all that fair to me; whether or not I actually deserved it, I figured I just got a lucky break.

“See you tomorrow!” Tommy said.

I thought about the routine long and hard that night and decided to give it my all for the next day’s performance – I was going to earn my spot outright!

Day 3: Perform

I have to admit I had some jitters getting ready for the performance on Day 3.

I wasn't Tommy's only pupil who showed up that morning; he had trained up some other hopefuls as well; he lined us all up outside the shipping container. This time the doors were open. I tried to take a look inside, but it was all dark.

"Wait!" Tommy said, "You're going to need a pen when you get inside."

He handed me a pen, I stepped inside, and the doors closed. My eyes were still adjusting to the dark when I heard a voice from the back of the container say, "Sign this."

I couldn't see a face but I could make out the shape of some hands that were passing me a piece of paper. I took the paper and tried to read it, but it was too dark.

"Sign it," the voice said, sounding remarkably like Tommy putting on a Swiss accent.

"But I don't even know what it says," I replied, "Can't I take it outside to read it first?"

"No!" the voice said firmly, "The contracts stay here. They're printed on very special paper that will disintegrate if the light hits it."

My eyes were starting to get accustomed to the dark, so I squinted to see if I could make out any words on the contract.

"If Top Secret pays me for my time, I will give that money to Tommy," I read out loud.

"Don't worry," the voice said, "Tommy will invest your pay and give you back ten times as much as you would have earned without my help!"

"I will never, ever, ever hire another coach besides Tommy," I read.

"Remember, Tommy's the best," the voice said, "I'm the...he's the only certified coach in the whole stadium!"

"And if I ever leave Top Secret," I read, "may my own skin be stretched over the drums so I can keep feeling the punishment for ever and ever while loyal club members beat my remains to a pulp with their drumsticks."

"That's a little creepy," I thought, not realizing I had said it out loud.

"Of course, that's all just metaphorical," the voice said, "sign the papers!"

I hesitated a bit, and one of my fellow pupils patted me on the shoulder. "Be glad they toned down the initiation ceremony for us," he said, "my dad said they used to make you slaughter a goat, slice it up, and stretch its skin over your own drum just to drill in the point."

"It's the true order of drum-making," the voice said, "just like our ancestors used to do in the caves."

It all made sense to me in a symbolic sort of way, but I still couldn't make out the fine print in the contract.

"Just sign it," the voice said, "It's the only way we know we can trust you with your new drum."

Apparently, the practice instruments we had played the day before were just kitschy replicas; priceless, hand-crafted drums were waiting for us at the back of the container.

“Your father signed, your grandfather signed, and all of your new friends here have signed as well.”

I looked around, and the other pupils all nodded at me. If it’s good enough for them, I thought, there must be something to it. Plus, I really wanted to try out the new drums. I held the paper against the wall and signed my name on the dotted line.

We each handed over our signed contracts, and we were escorted to a small porthole that we had to climb through to reach the back of the container.

“Don’t be dumb, pick up a drum!” the voice said, “Dragadiddle flamadiddle ratamacue!”

The wording seemed weird, and we weren’t sure what we were supposed to do.

“Repeat after me!” the voice said.

“Don’t be dumb, pick up a drum!” we shouted in unison, “Dragadiddle flamadiddle ratamacue!”

“Very good!”

After the recitation, we were each given a customized drum. The voice told us to start with the synchronized cadence we had all learned the day before.

“Mark time mark!” said the voice, setting the tempo with accompanying drumstick clicks.

With that intro, we dove into it the number we had practiced. The sound echoed off the wall of the container, and the reverberation sounded awesome. I looked around at my counterparts and saw that I really wasn’t alone in any of this – all these other guys had been through exactly the same thing as I had. Although we felt a bit trapped inside the stuffy container, we bonded like any other band of brothers as we jammed together over the next few hours.

After mastering the cadences in complete synchronicity, we were told that we were ready. When the doors on the back side of the container opened, Tommy was there to greet us.

“The voice in the container sounded familiar,” I said.

The others agreed.

“You can’t always trust your ears,” Tommy told us.

“I’m a bit confused by what they said about beating the pulp out of our own skin,” one of my counterparts told Tommy.

“What you hear in the container stays in the container,” Tommy said, “by the way, speaking of hearing, did you know I can actually wiggle my ears?”

Everyone got so distracted by his ear wiggling that they forgot about the disturbing drumskins.

“Well, I hope you remember your routine!” Tommy exclaimed, “because now it’s time to show the Founder what you’ve got!”

“Don’t be dumb, pick up a drum, dragadiddle paradiddle ratamacue!” we all shouted in response, echoing our primary cadence precisely in sync.

“If you get stage fright when you start playing,” Coach Tommy said, “and if you can’t seem to remember anything, just make sure to keep your eyes on me and follow every one of my hand signals. It’s a secret code that only you’ll be able to understand – the signs are meant to confuse everyone else.”

“Yes sir!” we all replied in unison.

“OK, eyes on me,” he shouted.

We were excited about this next adventure; we had all learned the same theory, practiced the same steps, and mastered the same music. When Tommy struck up the band, the unison was obvious, and it all came together beautifully.

We stared straight at Coach Tommy as we marched through our routine, watching his every direction. While we marched around in our straight lines, I saw lots of other cadets on the field, in the bleachers, and on the sidelines. Some were carrying different instruments, and some weren’t carrying anything at all. Every time I ran across anyone else, I recited the line we had been taught in the container.

“Don’t be dumb, pick up a drum, draga....”

Most of the other musicians we encountered had already turned the other way before we could even finish the line. Some gave us strange looks, while others shouted insults. We never stopped to actually find out what they were saying, and even so, all we could hear was the beat of our own drums, which drowned out everything else. I couldn’t be sure, but I think I heard one guy shout, “Yeah right, follow you tightwads? No thanks!” That pretty much summed up the general reaction to our invitations.

A few cadets who seemed to like our rhythm had started following us around the field. When they agreed to take up the challenge to pick up a drum, we directed them to the sidelines. Tommy promptly suited them up and sent them into the container to start drilling for their own show.

As we marched around performing our cadence, though, it started to sound a bit monotonous. I realized there was other music going on, and some of it seemed pretty catchy. Tommy had warned me about these distractions. When you’re playing in a large stadium, every drummer knows that if you listen to the noise around you, you’ll be off beat. By the time the sound bounces around the stadium and reaches your ears, you can actually find yourself a whole beat behind. The answer is to follow your drum major’s visual cues. Every marching drummer knows that: watch the baton and you’ll be right on target. If you divert your eyes, your ears will deceive you!

We did just that, sticking to Tommy’s signals while keeping in mind that everyone else was just a distraction.

“Perfect!” he said when we finished our routine and met him on the sidelines, “No technical errors at all!”

“Really,” I responded, remembering a few gaps in the number, “to me it felt like we making some major mistakes.”

"It might sound that way," Tommy said, but as long as you're playing what's written, even the mistakes are correct."

"But I thought you said Hänsli didn't make mistakes," I countered, "Should we ask him about the gaps in the music?"

"You deal with me, and I'll worry about talking to the Founder," Tommy said, "Remember, to you he is Herr Doktor Professor Zermatt, you are not on a first-name basis with him; you are to *always* refer to him by his complete name going forward.

I nodded my head and changed the subject: "I thought we'd find more fans out there," I said, "How come everybody seems annoyed by us?"

"They're too ignorant to recognize our prominence," Tommy said, "Now let's stop with the questions and huddle up."

We put down our drums and gathered in a circle around Tommy.

"Congratulations!" he said, handing us our certificates for Day 3, "You have all demonstrated that you have what it takes to tackle the next step tomorrow. But first, go ahead and have some fun tonight!"

We gave ourselves a cheer and started to disperse.

"Remember, you're going to need to team up with a partner tomorrow," Tommy reminded us, "So spend some time getting to know other snare drummers – make sure you only associate with those whose drums have a Top Secret sticker on them. Don't get distracted by anyone else!"

I took my marching snare back to the container and heard some bongo drums coming from the other side. I went to check it out and found a bunch of long-haired hippie-types gathered around in a circle. They definitely didn't seem like Top Secret material, but they looked like they were having a good time.

Despite Coach Tommy's warning, I started talking to some of the bongo drummers to find out what they thought of the auditions. As it turned out, they had all sorts of differing ambitions and ideas.

"There's nobody behind that glass up there," one of them said.

"The Founder was there," someone else said, "but I think he's out grabbing a coffee or taking a smoke break, because nobody has heard from him in a long time."

"He?" another bongo player said, "*She's* the warmest, kindest person you could possibly imagine; in fact, I've heard that everybody who's here for the audition gets a free ticket into the professional group no matter how you perform out there."

"Coach Tommy's crazy!" another said with a laugh, "Criminally insane!"

"Sorry?" I asked, pretending not to hear the evil insult above the sound of the bongos. Tommy had actually warned me that non-snare drummers would say discriminatory things like this. I knew I shouldn't engage them any further, so I was prepared to dismiss their opinions and find myself a more tolerant crowd. I started walking away when another bongo player spoke up.

"What did he tell you about where you came from?" he asked, "Let me guess: a drum set in the attic, a trophy, and some Top Secret videos on a tour bus?"

I was shocked. How did this hippie know about my past? Had he snuck into my files? As I thought about it, though, I realized I couldn't actually remember anything before I had woken up lying on the field. Tommy had simply filled in the gaps for me, and I never doubted any of it.

"He tells all of his recruits the same story," the hippie said with a smile, "It seems to work as long as you don't ask any questions, but everyone else here knows that he made it all up."

Could it be? I asked the others if they remembered where they had come from.

"I was a soldier in a military drum and bugle corps," one of them said.

"I was a football player," said another.

"I was a cheerleader."

"I wasn't anything at all before. I just showed up here spontaneously."

That didn't make any sense to me at all. "You must have come from somewhere outside the stadium," I said.

"Nope," came the reply, "There's nothing out there beyond the stadium walls. This field is all there is."

All of the stories sounded completely absurd to me, but none so much as the idea that this structure was our whole world. It wasn't a concept I could even grasp.

"So why not check it out for yourselves?" I asked.

"The doors lock when you leave," I was told, "and nobody gets back in."

"But what about the world tour we're prepping for?" I asked, completely baffled by the notion that there might be no such thing.

They all started laughing. "Make the most of it here," one of them said, "Cause you'll never play again once you leave the stadium."

No world tour? I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

I saw other directors on the sidelines debriefing their band members. As they disbanded, I thought I'd check with some of the more regimented musicians to get their stories. Each of them claimed to know what was outside the stadium, but I started to wonder if those expectations had simply come from their own coaches. All they seemed to want to talk about anyway was what the Founder was judging them on out on the field.

"I heard directly from my coach that the Founder wants to see something syncopated," one of them said.

"He's actually looking for more of a hip-hop groove," said one of the musicians from another ensemble.

"He's most impressed by speed," said another.

"It's all about accuracy and precision."

There was no consensus at all; I went back to our storage container, unsure of what to think. Maybe I should have listened to Tommy and avoided conversing with anyone without a Top Secret sticker on their drum.

To my surprise I saw a drummer leaning up against the container, playing a catchy cadence that was unlike anything I had heard before. On the side of his drum was a Top Secret sticker, so I struck up a conversation.

“What do you think this whole thing is about?” I asked, “Do you think the Founder is happy with our performance?”

“Be nice and enjoy playing” he replied, “I think that’s all there is to it.”

That made a lot of sense to me. No matter what Tommy said, I hoped that was the real answer. It was, in fact, the only thing I had heard that day that sounded even remotely plausible to me. We played a couple of pieces together, and I really liked how his improvisation added to it.

“Can we partner up for the teaching routine in tomorrow’s audition,” I asked.

“Sure, but just so you know, I’m not really a Top Secret fan – I just tried the drum on for fun. And what’s this about an audition?”

I told him I was shooting for a spot in Top Secret’s line.

“Who would want that?” he asked, “You guys all look like you have drumsticks up your....”

“Let me introduce you to some bongo players,” I said, trying to change the subject.

Tommy was not going to like this, but I thought we’d make a good team. I didn’t mention the regimented expectations, but I figured he’d fall in line once he met Tommy. I talked him into giving it a shot, and we spent the rest of the evening with the bongo players who weren’t so uptight about the routines.

Day 4: Teach

We showed up for the final day of the auditions and were assigned a set of new recruits who had just arrived that day. We were supposed to learn a new marching piece that the Founder had written, teach it to the recruits, and perform it for grading.

“The Founder is going to want to see leaders,” said Coach Tommy, “He needs to see how well you can pull someone else into line and motivate them to improve their performance.”

We all nodded our heads.

“No slackers!” he added.

We gathered the new recruits and started learning our new piece. We threw in some of our own style, and I thought the end result was uniquely innovative. It felt great to have something we had created ourselves instead of only playing someone else’s music. I thought it was an awesome blend of regiment and freestyle, and I was sure the Founder would take notice.

“Remember,” Tommy said as he made the rounds to each group, “repetition leads to perfection!”

I took his philosophy and walked the new recruits through their drills again and again.

“OK, performance time,” Tommy said near the end of the day, “For this performance, I am not just your coach, I am also the band director and the drum major!”

I didn't see how he could fill all three roles simultaneously, but we lined up on the 50-yard line with our team and got ourselves ready.

"Don't be dumb, pick up your drum!" I shouted, clicking my drumsticks together to mark the time.

"Dragadiddle, paradiddle, ratamacue!" the recruits replied in unison.

We marched out onto the field together with the cadence driving our steps. All of the other teams started stepping out as well, playing their own tunes. I tried to keep my eyes on Tommy, but others kept getting in the way. Each team was watching their own drum major on the sidelines. This was bound to be a disaster!

Out of the corner of my eye, I kept seeing collisions. One of Tommy's other recruits came head to head with a color guard member. Tommy's drummer pulled the heaviest drum sticks out of his stick bag and beat the living daylights out of the flag cadet.

"Keep marching," Coach Tommy shouted from the sidelines, noticing that I had gone off step.

"That was a little over the top, don't you think?" I shouted back, "Shouldn't we report him to the Founder?"

"That flag twirler was asking for it," Tommy replied, "Let's just hope nobody saw that, because it would be really bad for my reputation."

"Reputation?"

"Quick," Tommy shouted to the instigator, "Wipe that blood off your sticks!"

I was shocked but I didn't want the Founder to see me arguing with Tommy. I started counting the rhythm of my own steps to get back on beat.

"Don't break cadence," Tommy shouted, "and don't you dare talk to anyone else out there!"

For some reason, something just didn't feel right; I had to keep my eyes right on Tommy to avoid letting the other musicians distract me, but the visual cues Tommy wanted me to follow from his mace just didn't seem to jive with the music. It wasn't even close! As the set neared its midpoint, I felt more and more out of place and then started to freeze up. With all of the practicing I had done, I didn't expect to be struggling in that way.

As we continued our routine, we found ourselves on a collision course of our own. Directly in front of us was a lively band playing a blend of jazz, hip hop, R&B, and soul music. My dad had warned me about these guys. They got in his way during his own audition, and Tommy's recruits had run them right over.

"Go around them!" Tommy shouted.

I'd have to take my feet off the chalk line, so I hesitated.

"It's ok," Tommy shouted again as we got ever closer, "We learned our lesson last time around. We need to go around them!"

I was relieved to avoid a collision and quickly got back into my comfort zone following along the yard line. I still had their music in my head, though, and I found myself playing along to their timing instead of watching Tommy.

A glee club started crossing diagonally toward us, and I got ready for another diversion. They were singing showtunes, and I found myself humming along.

“Stay on your yard line,” shouted Tommy when he noticed I was straying.

“But we’ll run right into them!” I countered.

“That’s an order!” he replied, “straight from Zermatt.”

“But we went around the jazz band,” I challenged, “Why can’t we do that again!”

“No buts!” Tommy shouted, “Keep marching!”

One of the choirboys ended up right in front of me. I had a split second to decide what to do.

“Sweep the leg!” Tommy said.

I tried to take him out and stay on my feet, but it was an absolute disaster. Our whole line was knocked to the ground – instruments and all. We staggered to our feet one by one and tried to get back to our line. A few of the singers were still in front of me.

“Go around!” shouted Tommy.

“But the Founder...:”

“Zermatt agrees with me on this one,” Tommy said, “Leave your line!”

I was a bit disoriented by how quickly Herr Zermatt had changed his mind. I looked around to get my bearings but I couldn’t see Tommy: A tuba was blocking my view. Tubas? I hadn’t even noticed them before. Top secret doesn’t have a brass section, and here was an oompa band out on the field; this was getting crazy! As I struck up my cadence, the tuba player turned, and his instrument knocked me in the head.

I found myself staring up at the sky for the second time that day. I knew the Founder wanted to see precision, and I was sure that I was blowing it now with my stumbling routine. I thought of the contract I had signed and how awesome we all sounded inside the container. That memory helped me muster the strength to get back on my feet. We all regrouped and tried to pick up where we had left off. It took some effort, but eventually we got it sorted out and found our groove again.

Things improved as we moved through the rest of the set. Everything finally seemed to be flowing smoothly and comfortably by the time we got to the middle of our final number. The new recruits were falling in line, and we had learned our rudiments well enough to just rattle them off by habit wherever they showed up in our music. Tommy had stopped yelling, so that must have meant that the Founder was happy with us. The field was clear in front of us, and we were really starting to enjoy performing the music.

Part 5: Time-out

Now this next little incident was never supposed to be part of the audition, but I’ll include this part just the same:

Right as we got to the climax of our finale, my feet hit something. I kept on marching, but as I looked down I saw that I was trampling the flag that had been dropped at the beginning of the set.

It made me sick to think of the color guard missing one of its members – someone who happened to love twirling that flag and had just as much a right to perform as I did. Tommy's concern for his reputation rang in my ears. I knew I needed some answers!

I threw down my sticks, put my hands up to make a T shape, and shouted "Time Out!"

All of the musicians around me stopped playing their music, and everything went silently into slow motion. All eyes were on me.

I hesitated for a second, wondering if I had made a big mistake in breaking cadence...then marched straight off the field over to Tommy's seat on the sidelines.

"What's the deal with the glee club?" I shouted at him.

"What are you, a flag football player?" he shouted back, "There are no friggin' time-outs in a drum corps! Get back in line!"

"I asked you a question, sir!"

"You don't get to ask the questions here, son!"

"Well I'm not going back out there until I get some answers," I said, "so we might as well talk."

"Fine," Tommy said, "Their coach is hell-bent on seeing me fail. He's my old nemesis and he'll do whatever it takes, including failing his own team, just to see me go down. I won't stand for that!"

"Well, I actually enjoy their music," I said.

"What? These guys are singing without any instruments at all," Tommy said, "It's not even music. It's unnatural!"

"I happen to like it," I said.

"Don't be fooled," Tommy said, "They're just trying to be a distraction to make everyone else fail the audition."

"The Founder told me they aren't even supposed to be on the field," Tommy said, "They're imposters!"

"So why did we give way the second time?" I asked.

"I just can't see you get knocked down again..."

I felt a brief measure of understanding for his predicament; maybe he cared about my well-being after all.

"...because it might damage the drums."

Well there it was. The priceless drums had been the biggest concern all along.

"So the Founder told you to tell me to first plow them over, then to let them be?"

"That's right!"

“The Founder who’s right up there behind the glass in the box seats?”

“Yes – and you’ve got his personal guarantee for a spot in Top Secret if you stick with the program – though this little charade of yours might put that spot in jeopardy.”

“I’ll take that chance,” I said, “I’m just wondering how I’m supposed to know that this performance is even what the Founder wants to see. It doesn’t seem right to knock people over, and besides, it seems like the sheet music is full of mistakes!”

“I told you those mistakes are there to test you,” Tommy said, “You’ve got a personal copy of the sheet music that he *handwrote* for you. It’s even got his original seal on it!”

“You mean this one right here?” I asked, pointing to the sheet music with the routine I had spent the whole audition learning.

“Yes,” Tommy said, “that’s the one!”

Something in the seat behind him caught my eye, and Tommy noticed the diversion immediately.

“Don’t look over there,” he said.

Well, of course that made me want to take an even closer look. I walked around him and found some pieces of balsa wood, a carving knife, an inkpad, and some wood shavings on the chair – along with a finely carved seal. I picked up the seal and turned it over.

“This looks just like the one that was stamped on my contract,” I said, “It looks to me like you made your own seal.”

“Well yes, as a matter of fact, if you have to know, I made it myself,” he said.

I was stunned at this admission. I thought he would fess up entirely after having been caught red-handed, but he managed to stop short of admitting any sort of wrongdoing by offering further explanations:

“Of course, the Founder gave me the instructions on how to carve it,” he added.

“So you’re absolutely sure this routine of yours is what he would want to see?”

“Yes, I’m positive,” he said, “He told me right through my own headset.”

“This headset?” I asked, pointing to the one he was wearing.

“Yes, it’s a direct line,” he answered.

I looked a little closer and saw that the battery compartment lid was missing. “But there are no batteries in it!” I said.

“Well, I don’t need batteries,” he countered, “My body is a natural antenna, and when I wear the headset, I hear the messages coming through loud and clear; in fact, I feel the messages right through my soul. And I know these messages come from the Founder!”

“Because you feel it?” I asked.

“Yes!” he said.

“So why the headset?” I asked.

"The headset gets me in tune so that I know how to follow his instructions."

"So you don't actually hear anything through the headset? With your actual ears?"

He wiggled his ears again. I wasn't impressed.

"Not exactly," he said, "it's more like I've got *musical* ears that can perceive the message."

"But the musical symbols are written down," I said, "They're actual characters in print, not feelings!"

"Yes, the notes on the pages are real," Tommy said, "And they represent Zermatt's real instructions."

"But they're in the same *handwriting* as the notes you *handwrote* for me," I argued.

"That's right," Tommy said.

"But you just told me they're fake."

"That's because you asked."

I was getting nowhere with my questions. "Does everyone else know about this?" I asked.

"They haven't asked."

"So you're not planning to tell them?"

"Certainly not!" Tommy replied, "What would the Founder say if they decided against Top Secret because of a silly little detail like this?"

"Seriously?"

"Absolutely," he said, "None of this really matters anyway, because you've already signed the contract; now get back in line!"

"But you lied to me."

"Well yes, technically, but I had to," he explained, "It's the only way you would listen."

"So you lied to our new recruits, too?"

"Well yes, but look at them now, it got them out on the field," he said, "It got them where they wanted to be."

"But what if they prefer another style of music?"

"Like I said, that's not music," Tommy said, "the Founder only likes percussion."

"Well, I know Hänslis is a drummer," I said, "But doesn't he enjoy other music too?"

"Stop calling him that!" Tommy warned, "He likes percussion music the best; that's why he wants us all to be drummers: Top Secret drummers!"

"So what's everyone else doing here?"

"They're just distractions," he said, "they're going to fail the audition anyway."

"All of them?" I asked.

“Yes, every last one of them,” Tommy explained, “That is unless, of course, they decide to get with the program and learn the drum rudiments.”

“But some of them have never played a drum – or even seen a drum!”

“Listen, I didn’t make the rules here,” Tommy said, “The Founder wrote the rulebook, and he told me it’s all fair in the end.”

I couldn’t believe Herr Zermatt would just write off everybody else if they didn’t line up outside our container to get a drum when the number was over.

“What if they don’t like what they see in the container?” I asked, “I mean, you have to admit that was kind of weird.”

“Never mind, they’ll come around. Someday they’ll all want to be drummers. And if one of the qualified Top Secret drummers sends in a referral card in the future, we’ll print out honorary Top Secret memberships for everyone else.”

“But what if they still don’t want to be drummers?”

“Well that would be their loss,” Tommy said, “Of course everyone is going to want to be a drummer in the end, though; everyone wants in, and Top Secret is the only drum corps worth drumming in.”

“What if they’d rather join Stomp, or Blast!, or Taiko Dojo?” I asked, “Will they still be able to choose their own music at that point?”

“Of course,” Tommy said impatiently, “We can’t make them march to our beat, but at least they’ll all have the option.”

“But most of them have never met anyone in Top Secret; how are they supposed to get a referral?” I asked, “That just doesn’t make any sense!”

“It doesn’t need to make sense,” Tommy said, getting exasperated, “it just needs to *feel* right.”

“But it doesn’t even feel right!”

“Listen, that tuba player must have knocked you on the head pretty hard,” Tommy said, “Your students are going to flunk their own auditions, and you don’t want that on your head, do you?”

“Guess not...”

“Trust me,” he said, “Your father trusted me, and your grandfather trusted me. I know your family better than you do; and they would all want you to trust me right now.”

“I don’t know about this whole thing,” I said, feeling exhausted myself, “What if others get in my way again?”

“As for the glee club and the jazz band,” Tommy answered, “Herr Zermatt told me himself that he wants them off the field.”

“Through your broken headset...” I mumbled under my breath

“What did you say?”

“Nothing,” I answered, “I just wanted to know why you told me to go around the jazz band. Dad told me he had to knock them out of the way back in his day.”

“The Founder told me to change that, because we were getting booed by the crowds in the stands.”

“But I thought our scores come from the Founder, not the crowd,” I said, feeling more confused than ever before.

“OK, here’s the deal. I mean he *used* to want them off the field,” Tommy explained, “Now he wants the jazz band on the field, but no glee club. Herr Zermatt’s in charge, and his orders have nothing to do with the crowd’s opinion.”

“Now wait a second,” I said, “You just told me the crowd was the deciding factor.”

“No I didn’t.”

The stadium’s gas-driven lights started to flicker in the background. Maybe I was going nuts after all.

“But we dodged the glee club toward the end as well,” I said, trying to salvage my own sanity, “What gives?”

“That’s right,” Tommy answered, “Herr Zermatt still doesn’t think they should be on the field at all, but for his own reasons, he told me for now we need to let them do their thing – whatever that is.”

“Well that makes me feel even worse for having knocked them down the first time around.”

“You were only following orders, so that won’t count against you,” Tommy said confidently, “You’ve got my personal guarantee on that.”

“You heard that directly from the Founder?”

“Yes, he told me through the headset.”

“The one that doesn’t work.”

“What are you talking about?” Tommy asked, “Of course it works – the instructions just come through very faintly. These earpieces help tune out all the other ambient noise; luckily, I’ve got really fine-tuned hearing, so I can pick it all up, but you wouldn’t be able to hear it yourself. That’s why you need me to translate it for you.”

“So I’m just going to have to take your word for it?”

“No, not at all,” Tommy said, “Don’t you feel good when you’re performing well, and the audience is cheering while you’re hitting all of your marks?”

“I guess so.”

“Well there’s your answer!” Tommy said, “In fact, they’re still applauding. Don’t you hear the cheers right now? They love you out there.”

“Really?”

“Sure, just close your eyes and listen. If you get in tune, you’ll actually feel the applause.”

I gave it a try, and sure enough, I could hear it; but when I opened one eye just a bit I could see that nobody in the stands was even watching anymore. In fact, lots of them had started throwing things since they were bored and disappointed by this unplanned intermission. The noise I was hearing didn't make any sense. I opened both eyes and saw that Tommy had turned around and was fiddling with something. I tapped him on the shoulder, and he jumped back, a bit startled.

"OK," he admitted, "I'm just playing back a recording of them cheering while you were playing."

"What?"

"You were supposed to keep your eyes closed, so now you've missed the whole lesson," he said, "but trust me, they love you, and they all want to be you. They only wish they were good enough to be in Top Secret."

"I don't know," I said, "They seem happy enough without us."

"You've got that wrong," Tommy said, "Don't you remember what I told you when I first met you? You are supposed to be Top Secret's center snare someday, leading the squad on their world tour. That's how you spread happiness to the crowds. And you're giving it all up? For what? Don't blow it now! The Founder will be so disappointed in you."

I looked up toward the box, but the stadium lights were so bright that I couldn't see anything at all. It reminded me of how blurry everything looked when I woke up on the field the first day.

"When you first found me, lying on the field," I said to Tommy, "How do I know what you told me about my past is even true?"

"How dare you ask that sort of question?" Tommy said, "Are you insinuating that I've been lying to you?"

"Well, how can I be sure you speak for the Founder? How can I know that Top Secret even exists? Have you ever even seen the Founder?"

"That's something I don't talk about, but yes, if you have to know, I've seen him myself."

"With your own eyes?" I asked.

"Well, it might have been his shadow...or maybe his reflection...but it was definitely him!"

I had a strange sensation that the hippies were right with their diagnosis of Tommy.

"Like I said, I can't talk about it," Tommy said, "Now everyone's getting restless and impatient, so you need to man up and do your job."

I could see that the field was getting pelted with objects thrown by the restless crowd.

"This is your last chance," Tommy said, "Go back to your students out there and finish the audition!"

"I don't think I can do this," I said, "I don't even know what I'm doing here anymore."

"Well, if you're going to be a coward and walk off the field, do it quietly," he said, "Don't you dare make a scene!"

I weighed out my options and finally decided to march back onto the field and pick up my drum. Having come this far, I might as well finish my audition. One way or another, this was going to be the last number. I looked around and saw a bunch of eyes on me. The cheers and jeers resonated all around in a frenzy of sound. I had been warned about this: The noise echoing off the stands was confusing. “Don’t listen to the sound around you,” I had been taught, “Just watch the director and trust him completely!”

I looked down at the fifty-yard line which led straight to Tommy’s podium. As I looked up at him, he was holding his mace high in the air, ready to strike the downbeat that would signal the commencement of the finale and my concluding march toward him.

What should I do when that baton drops?



So...now this has become my own story; this is the point at which the analogy has caught up with my real life in real time. And Nathan has told me once again that *I am that man*. This where I am standing right now. I’m not awaiting any further instruction; I know all I am ever going to know. The choice is now mine alone. What should I do?

Let’s turn this question into another multiple-choice quiz. Should I:

- Stick with the snare drum and fall in line again
- Walk quietly off the field with as little disruption as possible
- Go relax in the stands and enjoy the show with some popcorn
- Try a new instrument
- Boycott and picket the show
- Punch Tommy in the face
- Have a beer and make fun of those who are auditioning from the stands
- Share the lessons I’ve learned so far while learning as much as I can from others

Whether it came from the Founder or not, in the back of my head, I know the music I’ve learned is a part of me wherever I go:

*His blood runs through my instrument and his song is in my soul
My life has been a poor attempt to imitate the man
[Am I] a living legacy to the leader of the band?*

Well, am I?

~~~~~

### *Retrospective*

I thought Tommy had the Founder's blessing when he told me to stay on target and knock others down as I stuck to my line and proceeded toward the podium. Wherever I go from here, I can see now that walking right over anyone who got in my way was bad advice. The orders came from someone whose personal opinions had been swayed by those who had wronged him in the past. It had nothing at all to do with a directive from the box seats; it had nothing to do with protecting the band members. In the end, I realized it had everything to do with retribution, protecting his own reputation, and preserving his expensive instruments.

So regardless of my ultimate path, my first step needs to be an apology to those I knocked over along the way. If any are still down, I want to help them get on with their own audition.

I owe another apology to those whose music I ignored or invalidated in the past. I want to hear their music now. I like the idea of asking lots of questions – this time not to convince everyone to be drummers but to find out what beauty they may see in their own instruments.

And I owe the biggest apology to my teaching partner and our understudies. I have no answers at this point, but I'd still like to take all of the lessons we've cumulatively learned, recognizing both the imperfections and the sincerity of the teachers along the way, and write our own show. I don't disagree with the basic theory in the drum rudiments; that can still serve as the backbone; but I'd like to help them recognize that music is so much bigger than the rhythm section!

Even if we write down the planned measures, there needs to be enough room to insert solos wherever we like, allowing everyone do play what feels right, even if it isn't exactly as prescribed in the sheet music. As for me, I'm going to keep on drumming because that's what I like to do and that's what I know how to do. But when I find a groove, I'm going to run with it, regardless of the previous plan. If the audience likes it, fine, they can cheer me on. If they hate it, fine, they can throw tomatoes at me. I can take it.

If I come up with my own cadence, my interns may march in step with me or go their own way. I'll try to teach them the parts of music theory that opened up the freedom to jam. Without some of the basic tenets, they might be stuck without being able to find a groove of their own – one that makes them happy and allows them to freely express themselves.

Maybe Top Secret's all that. Maybe it's not. But by no means is it the only drum corps out there, and preferences are subjective. What will my father think – and his father before him – knowing that I walked off the field? That I rejected their personal coach? That I decided Top Secret just wasn't my style?

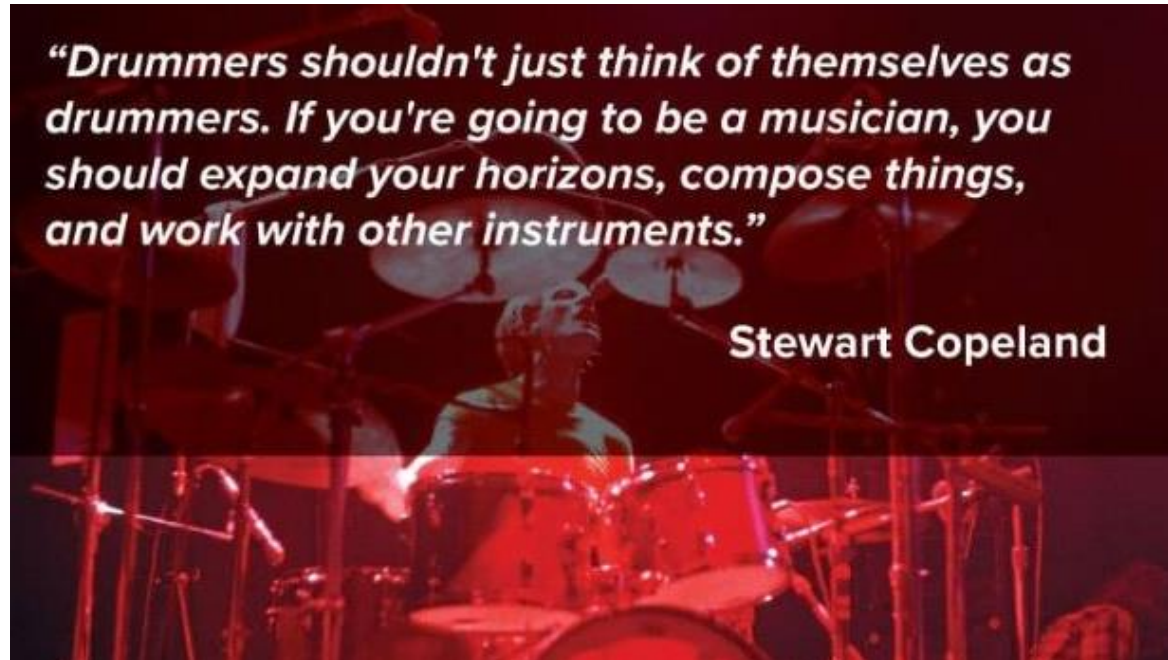
Maybe that shouldn't matter, but it does figure into the mix. At this point, nobody remembers a thing from before the Day 1 concussion. All we have to go on is the stories others have told us. Was Tommy really supposed to be my coach? He told me a story that I bought into for over forty years, but I didn't pick him; he was picked for me. Or was he? Should I be looking out for a replacement coach? Do I even need a coach?

For the time being, I have no idea who is behind that one-way glass – it might be an empty room for all I know. You may have heard a voice coming from that direction; maybe you’ve seen a glimpse of who’s there and what the scorecard looks like. That’s awesome for you – keep playing to the best of your convictions if that’s the case! But now that I’m standing on the field with my own students, having confirmed the parts of Coach Tommy’s story that are made up – that he even admitted he made up – well, I can’t deal with the lies. I’m going to have to throw those out and let my understudies know that I am rescinding any orders that are based on those lies.

I’d still like to think that there’s something outside the stadium, but rather than seeing life as an audition for what’s next, I’m planning to live my life as if this is the grand finale itself. Because it may well be.

I’m convinced that none of us will ever know what’s outside the stadium until we take that final stroll through the one-way exit doors. So I’m not claiming to know anything at all, but I suspect that if I had continued to step on others – or to ignore them altogether – I’d end up flunking the audition. If there is indeed a Founder up in the box seats, I believe he would have expected me to fire Tommy a long time ago, and that every avoidable takedown from here on out would be a mark against me.

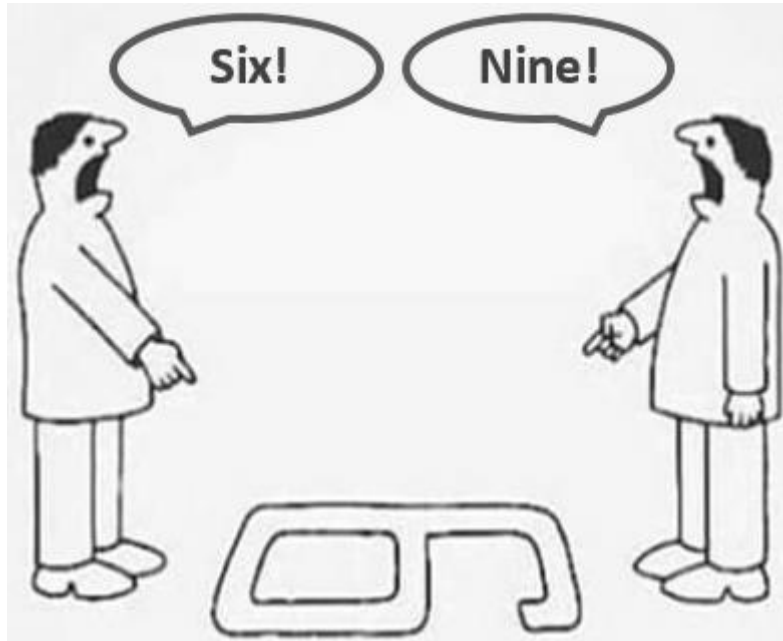
We’ve all learned some good lessons and bad lessons during our time in the stadium. We can only take our best guess as to which is which. Maybe we’re right, maybe we’re wrong. Maybe we have a collective responsibility to take out those who are ruining the show for others and let them know just how awesome our own drum corps is. But I’m going to be much more careful in casting that judgment going forward. And in the end, I’m convinced that how we treat each other along the way is more important than whether we are right.



## My Reality: Prima Ballerina

“How we treat each other is more important than who is right.”

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I was raised in a conflict-free family – not because of an absence of things we should have conflicted with each other about, but because we simply didn’t know how to handle conflict. Maybe the Book of Mormon scripture claiming that “contention is of the devil” led us to believe that it was something to be feared, or maybe we just shared enough common interests and goals to keep things smooth. In any case, it seemed like my siblings and I agreed on pretty much everything growing up – or at least we didn’t disagree strongly enough to express any dissent. Now that we disagree on something as fundamental as religion, however, we seem to be in new territory that takes me right back to the last fight I can recall in our household:

I don’t even remember exactly what we were fighting about, but I do remember being absolutely sure that I was right. No way was my kid sister going to convince me otherwise! When my mother finally intervened to prevent our bickering from escalating any further, the lecture started out like it always did:

“You’re 12, so you should know better!”

“But I’m right,” I countered, “and she’s wrong!”

Well, my backtalk got me nowhere; Mom sat us down on the couch together to try to make a more lasting point. When she started into a story about one of her university dance classes, we knew we were in it for the long haul; I don’t know why this particular story managed to stick with me over the years – no doubt there were many other lectures that I have long since forgotten – but here’s how the story went (admittedly with a bit of embellishment of my own):

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After years of grueling coursework spent mastering the theory, interpretation, and execution of a wide range of dance styles, the only thing that stood between the Class of 1965's dance students and their degrees was a final performance course. When the students gathered for the dean's opening lecture at the beginning of their last term, they were shocked to hear that their entire semester's grade would be based on the final exam, which would involve the performance of a self-choreographed lead dance number. This, of course, made the students very nervous, since a failing grade would rule out graduation.

The students each put tremendous effort into preparing a final dance routine that would be sure to impress the professor by showcasing their own, unique strengths through their choreography. All of their preparations came down to this one dance, so they worked incredibly hard week after week trying to perfect their chosen solo routines.

As the semester neared an end, each student was assigned a time slot to appear backstage for their graded performance.

Exam day arrived all too soon, and the students each made their way to the recital venue – a beautiful concert hall where the top-scoring students might hope to perform as professional dancers one day. The professor took a seat in the audience with a clipboard in hand. To add to the realism of the performance, she had even arranged for a live pit orchestra. Each student showed up at their allotted time; to their surprise, however, they found that everyone had been assigned the same time slot. Amidst the growing confusion, they all took their starting positions. Without any warning, the orchestra struck up the introductory bars.

"Ready?" asked the professor from the back of the hall.

Nobody was the least bit ready.

"5, 6, 7, 8, begin!" she directed.

The students each reacted differently; the most confident of the students stepped straight into their routines. Other, less confident students slowly emerged on the stage and struggled to find their place. Still others didn't know where to begin and just stayed frozen in their first position. Those who couldn't cope at all tried to escape the professor's view by running offstage. Some shook their heads at the commotion, while others simply collapsed in a heap.

Meanwhile, the professor observed their routines keenly and took detailed notes.

As the music progressed, everyone eventually got over themselves and made it out onto the dance floor. Some decided to just dance in place so they wouldn't get in anyone's way. Others adapted the moves they had planned to perform and worked around their classmates. A few belligerent types ran straight through their routines as if nobody else was on stage.

Some collisions resulted in apologies; others resulted in curses. A few bruises and black eyes became dreadfully apparent as the music continued. Confidence levels swung wildly back and forth as everyone wondered just how the professor was ever possibly going to be able to grade such a chaotic performance.

The closing bars of the music sounded; the professor scribbled some final notes while the students took their bows.

The following day, all of the dancers returned to receive their marks; each was handed a note with a critique and a grade.

The reaction was a mixture of gasps and tears. Some of the most talented dancers were absolutely devastated to receive a failing mark. Other dancers with lesser technical skills were surprised to receive an A, especially considering that their routines had not gone as planned.

One particularly gifted dancer began to argue that her choreography had been the most difficult of all, and that she had made no technical mistakes in performing it.

"So why did you flunk me?" she cried.

The professor didn't respond, but rather asked all of the dancers to take a seat to hear her final oration.

"I have brought a stack of course completion certificates and commendation letters with me," she said, "Who would like me to sign theirs?"

Every hand went up.

"My job here has been to get you ready for the real world," she said, "and the whole design of your education has been to prepare you for this transition. Do you see what I mean?"

The students weren't sure what she was getting at and shook their heads.

"For your performances tonight, you practiced what you had choreographed over and over again until it was embedded in your muscle memory."

With their own muscles aching, this particular statement resonated with the students.

"But when it comes to opening night in a real performance, regardless of your level of preparation, somebody is going to get in your way. It might be a stagehand. Or the lights won't be quite right. Or perhaps the audience will distract you. And other dancers will most certainly miss their mark at some point."

Angry glances darted back and forth between some of the dancers who felt that their own performance had been robbed by someone who got in their way.

“Well if you storm off stage in a huff, the audience will be left with an unfortunate gap. Perhaps the glitch wasn’t your fault to begin with. But to keep the performance beautiful, your job is to roll with it and prevent any ugly exchanges.”

“But now I’ll have to stay in school,” shouted the prima donna of the group, “I was all ready to join a troupe; they won’t take me without the certificate!”

“I understand,” responded the professor, “but in my opinion, you aren’t anywhere near ready.” After a short pause, she added, “I’m sorry, but you still have a lot to learn about performing with a professional dance troupe.”

This response was met with a few sets of rolled eyes, but other dancers – particularly those with black eyes – began to nod in agreement.

“As I’m watching the overall performance from the back of the hall, I can look past some of the technical omissions but I can’t ignore a collision,” the professor said, “And the angry glances and other body language I saw from some of you would certainly leave a stain on an evening’s performance.”

A few of the failing students packed up their things and stood up to leave in protest.

“Do you seriously expect me to recommend you to prestigious theatre companies and dance troupes,” the professor said, making her way to the door in advance of her disappointed students, “when you haven’t yet learned to make any adjustments for unpredictable surprises?”

The whole point of the exercise seemed to sink in for most of the students as they lined up to exit the hall, but fearing it might have been lost on the divas, the professor offered one last summary of the lesson for their benefit:

“How you interact with the whole troupe on stage,” she said, giving each dancer a hug as they left, “is more important than whether you were right!”

“Do you get the point?”

I waited for the answer, but the story was over.

“Krey, do you get the point?” my mom asked again.

“Oh, sure,” I replied, snapping back to reality and hoping to just end the lecture already.

“Good,” she said.

“But I was still right, you know,” I said, “and I can prove it.”

My mom sighed as she realized the lesson had not actually sunk in at all for me. I proceeded into my argument once again. I wasn’t sure if it would sway her, but when I finished laying out my case, I was surprised that she actually ended up agreeing with me.

“So that’s that!” I thought and got up to leave, feeling vindicated. But before I could take a single step toward the door, my sister started to argue her point as well. And to my dismay, Mom heard her out as well...and then told her she was right, too!

“But that’s no excuse for how you were treating each other,” she said, pointing at both of us.

The point was completely lost on me, since I was still stuck on an entirely different track that had ground the gears to a halt in my brain: How could we both be right? I saw mutual exclusivity on

this particular issue. It was either one or the other; we couldn't possibly both be right! But now Mom was basically saying that it didn't matter at all who was right. I thought of turning around and starting back into the argument, but I decided to just shrug it away for the time being and went back to playing Asteroids on the Atari.

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So that's the parable of the prima ballerina. My mother told me that this series of events actually happened in one form or another – probably in a much less dramatic way than what I've described here. In any case, this analogy of mine includes a measure of reality that captures my current philosophy of life. When I first heard it, I hated the story altogether; it didn't make any sense to me in the least! I was obsessed with my own grades at the time, and I thrived on consistency and predictability with my yet-to-be diagnosed OCD. In my junior high, the teachers reused every exam; all you had to do was ask an eighth grader and they could tell you exactly what was going to be on your next test. So this demented professor's subjective cruelty seemed completely unfair and made me awfully scared of college. I mean, what sort of grading system is that? It's not even remotely fair!

Over the years, though, I guess I've been left with a point about what really matters in life: how we treat each other is more important than who is right. This seems especially relevant now that my siblings and I find ourselves adopting what appear to be mutually exclusive religious views. But I think this story can apply to life in general and not just simply to religion; to get to the bottom of it for myself, I'd like to leave it in the form of Nathan's allegorical question: "Who are you?"

So let's make this one multiple choice. Are you/Am I:

- The timid, fearful student who doesn't want to get in anyone's way;
- The courteous, adaptable student who truly tries their best and allows everyone else the same privilege by helping them to shine in their own right;
- The guilt-ridden, self-deprecating student who believes they've made such huge mistakes that they might as well just quit;
- The obstinate, belligerent student who expects everyone else to either follow behind their prescribed dance routine or just get out of the freaking way;
- The unaccountable, finger-pointing student who has hired a personal trainer to make all of their decisions – and to take any blame in proxy;
- The zealous, paranoid student who forgets to dance at all because they've spent their time warning everybody else that they're all going to fail the audition if they don't fall in line;
- The positive, joyful student who keeps right on dancing because they just plain love to dance?

Perhaps I've missed some other character that would be more representative, but honestly, if this story serves as an analogy for life, which character are you? And who do you wish you were? If those two questions have two different answers, there's a problem. As for myself, I have identified an obvious gap in my own divergent answers, and the whole goal of the ramblings in this book has been to find a solution that allows me to answer both questions with the same response – being the same person I want to become!

If I look at the above list of characters, I know exactly who I want to become: I want to just enjoy the dance and do my best to help everyone else enjoy theirs – not because there's a grade at stake, but because to me that collective "joie de vivre," as the French call it, reflects the true measure of fulfillment. But honestly, that's not the character I have been in the past. Given that it took me this long in life to recognize the discrepancy – I'm already facing my fifties after all – I also

have to face the fact that if I don't do something about it now, I'll probably never be happy with the man in the mirror!

There are voices telling us to just stick to the dance routine that we have been taught. These voices will tell us that we can't be concerned about anyone adhering to an invalid ideology. You prepared that spin, so you are obliged to execute it as you've practiced, and if you happen to elbow someone else in the nose during the performance, well, it was your God-given right to do as you were told. No apology needed; you can comfortably shrug your shoulders, because the professor in the back is only concerned about your adherence to the prescribed, choreographed routine. In response to that viewpoint, I'll quote the Cold War philosopher Dr. Sumner: "Believe me when I say to you, I don't subscribe to this point of view | We share the same biology, regardless of ideology."

Now I'm certainly no dancer – in fact, I'll probably leave this world without ever having danced in front of anyone at all – so the prima ballerina might not be the most relevant example to illustrate my arrival at the crossroads I am facing today. But this same story could be told in other contexts, with the main character performing a chorus line, a tumbling routine, a martial arts kata, a haka, or any other number on a wide-ranging set of stages. As for myself, I've recognized parallels to the story of the dancer in pursuit of my own passions, including drum line auditions like the Top Secret example at the beginning of this chapter. Whether it's the dancer or the drummer, though, the end answer comes out as the same advice: just enjoy the performance, try to help some people along the way, and quit worrying about your grade!

If a drum solo can be viewed as an analogy for this life, as I look at my audition tape so far, I'm afraid I've been so obsessed with my own routine that I put on my blinders and plowed everybody else over with my coach's full blessing. But I hope that I am in the process of becoming the drummer who adjusts his routine as needed and respectfully allows everyone to shine with their own number – enjoying the diversity in their music while still calling out those who do as I have previously done by pushing their solo on everyone else. I may fire my coach in the end, or my coach may fire me; that's of no consequence anymore. Because my primary goal now is to become the drummer – or rather the all-around musician – who sincerely values the interaction with other musicians, stops thinking about the notes so mechanically, and just keeps making and playing music because that's what he loves to do – and not because of some scrutinizing professor's gradebook!

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*Footnote: What is real?*

I stated at the beginning of this chapter that I would start the Top Secret analogy with a true story. It obviously descended into absurdity...which is what happened in my real life as well. I don't know if I need to beat it to death with any further explanation, but looking at Paul Dunn and Jeffrey Holland's tendencies to blur the lines of truth with faith-based stories, maybe I should draw a line to clearly separate fact from fiction here.

The story about the dance class is at least partly true – in any case I do remember my mother telling me a version of that story. As far as the drum auditions, the drum set in the attic is real; the Grandville High School marching band was real; and my Drummer of the Year trophy is real. [Oh, but I failed to mention that the award was more of a joke and had nothing to do with musical talent. As a non-member of the school's music program, I merely picked up the heaviest bass drum when the real drummer got sick and bailed them out for the season...thus the trophy was just an expression of gratitude from the bona fide drummers – who all recognized that I didn't know the first thing about percussion!]



But those experiences did spark enough of a passion in me that I wanted to keep it up in college too. The BYU marching band had a history of accompanying the football team to the Holiday Bowl in Sunny San Diego, which sounded like a lot of fun. I happened to be overseas finishing up my missionary service during the BYU Marching Band's drum line auditions, so I had to send in an audio tape. I bought some drumsticks from a local music store in the small, German town of Neubrandenburg where I was stationed, took out my missionary guide, and spent an entire P-Day beating it into submission as a practice pad while recording it with my Walkman. I sent in the tape and was pleased to receive an acceptance letter into the drum line a few weeks later.

When I arrived at band camp, though, the instructor quickly realized that I couldn't actually read percussion music and could only play by copying what someone else played first. So I was demoted to holding the cymbal for the actual star of the show, the center snare. When the football team qualified for the Aloha Bowl in Hawaii instead of the Holiday Bowl, we all cheered, and I thought my servitude was going to pay off; but when the band director announced that they couldn't justify the cost of sending along the marching band, I let the Mormon swears fly:

“Flippin’ fetchers stinkin’ son of a bishop dangit to heck!” ...and thus ended my collegiate music career!

In the end, I never actually had any hope of making it into Top Secret or even to the lowliest timpani or triangle position on their squad; but I still loved drumming! While delivering pizza as a part-time job a few years later, I decided I’d rather be drumming, so I popped my instructional percussion tapes into my Jeep’s cassette deck and played the steering wheel with my drumsticks while steering with my knees during deliveries (don’t try this at home!) Eventually I learned each of the drills well enough to set up a home music school business, quit my delivery job, buy the mesh head drum kit I had been coveting, and teach the rudiments to a string of music students – all of whom ended up as better drummers than me! I ended up joining a local band, and I found that I enjoyed jamming in rehearsals as much as the performances. Maybe my kids will have more discipline and take it further one day, but as for me, nowadays I simply enjoy music without turning it into a competition or a business model.

So every bit of the story after the first mention of Top Secret is allegorical – made up! But I bring up the real, preceding experiences to illustrate how a phony poser can still have a real love and passion for music. I’ve felt the warm fuzzies that come from unity and harmony and marching in step, in both secular and spiritual settings, and I can’t seem to be able to distinguish between the two. I’ve stood on the 50-yard line (albeit backwards...); I’ve sung solos in choirs; in other settings, I’ve fought it out on the wrestling mat with a thousand eyes watching; and I’ve found myself in plenty of other positions where I had to decide whether to listen to my coach on the sidelines or do things my own way. The pressure of uniform conformity is real, as is the apparent peace that accompanies it. The fear of ignoring direct orders is real, as is the real peace that accompanies overcoming that fear. The fallacy in this case lies in the notion that the initial fear of the unknown has anything at all to do with foreboding forces of darkness. In my case, that turned out merely to be temporary uncertainty!

Each piece of the Top Secret story represents a phase of my life within Mormonism leading up to that choice on the 50-yard line. The four audition stages that are now behind me are 1) primary, 2) youth, 3) mission, and 4) parenthood in the LDS Church. As far as the time-out in Stage 5, I guess that’s whatever you call this thing I’m going through right now: My mid-audition crisis. The individual elements in the story can mean different things to different people: The shipping container could be the MTC, BYU, the temple, a chapel, a classroom, a youth conference, EFY, FSY, or any other setting where someone feels strength in the unity offered by the church or any other institution. Tommy could be a teacher, a parent, a youth leader, a bishop, the prophet who could wiggle his ears, or anyone else whose position, experience, or qualifications have put them in a leadership role for you.

Any of the details can really be taken to mean whatever you’d like; for me, each element refers back to the experiences that are outlined in the preceding chapters: Chapter 1 is the broken headset, Chapter 2 is the glee club, Chapter 3 is the jazz ensemble, Chapter 4 is the voice in the container, Chapter 5 is the belligerent recruit, Chapter 6 is the fake stamp, Chapter 7 is the fake cheers, Chapter 8 is the time-out; and everything that follows here is what happens following the commencement of game time after the time-out.

Now I’m teetering on that crucial, crunch-time brink, but I’ve left this story entirely open-ended. Where do I go from here? After spending way too much time building these hypothetical examples in my head, I ought to be able to figure out my next step by now. I’ll put together one last analogy in the final chapter to take it through the ultimate decision: Do I stay on board or jump ship?

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Chapter 10: Tempestuous

My Analogy: Man Overboard

"Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead!"

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*Just sit right back and you'll hear a tale,  
A tale of a fateful trip  
That started in the open sea  
Aboard a great big ship...*

My name is Chief Petty Officer Bernard, and I come from a long line of proud oarsmen. I grew up on the Ship, and I've been part of the crew for as long as I can remember. While we sailed the seas year after year, Captain Comoros used to tell us stories about the land we were heading to. Even though none of us had ever seen land ourselves, he told us he had been there and had seen it with his own eyes; he sure made the elusive idea of *dry land* sound beautiful with his detailed descriptions of mystical jungles and forests and plains and mountains. We didn't quite know how to picture it, but we all expected to eventually reach our destination and walk on solid ground one day; in fact, bolstered by calls of "land ahoy" from the crow's nest, a lot of my shipmates woke up each morning convinced that we would make landfall that very day. I wasn't so sure myself; in fact, sometimes I'd wonder whether the captain had dreamed it all up just to keep us at the oars. But I do



have to admit that it sounded like a great place, so I just kept right on rowing to the beat of the drum.

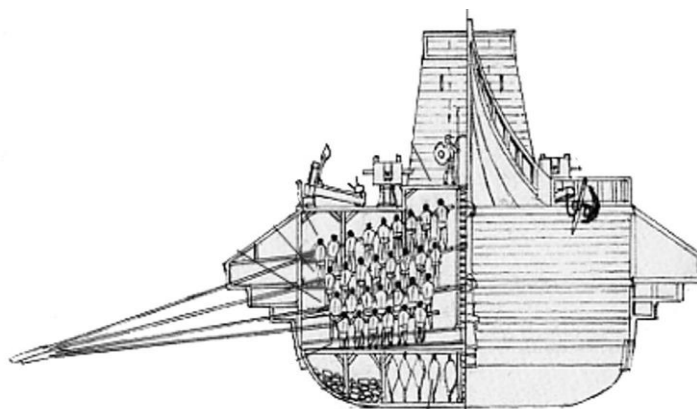
Then last year everything changed when I found myself bobbing in the waves in the open sea while I watched the Ship drift off toward the horizon without me. I felt excited to be setting off on a new adventure of my own, but it was still a bit scary. Even today, when the waves around me start to dwarf my little makeshift rowboat, I get out my oars and sometimes find myself paddling off in the direction I last saw the Ship heading. Now that I look back on my time on board, I feel funny even calling it “The Ship” – capitalized as if it was the only one in the ocean – but that’s just what we always called it, and it’s all I ever knew. And when the wind blows, sometimes I put up my tattered little sails, wondering if I’ll ever cross paths with my old floating home again.

I really don’t know how I would react if I did have a future encounter with my former crew, though. Would I want to climb back on board to see if anything had changed in the meantime? I can’t say for sure, but I know I didn’t jump out blindly; in fact, I contemplated every exit strategy I could conceive of before setting off in a cobbled-together craft with my rowing partner, Seaman Bianco, and the young cadets we were training.

During those first few days as we drifted farther and farther from the Ship, Bianco and I kept reassuring each other that we had made the right call; these days when we look up at the clear moon and feel the freedom of charting our own course, we shake our heads and wonder why we didn’t think to do this sooner. We still talk about life on the Ship on occasion; sure, there are some painful recollections, but we also have amusing memories of the routines, some of which seem awfully ridiculous from our new vantage point. If I really let myself reminisce, I realize that I did enjoy the parties, the processions, and other parts of our life on the Ship...the endless roll calls and training sessions maybe not so much, but even those give us some good material to smile about these days!

Well, a lot of the sailors I’ve encountered since setting sail in my own vessel have asked me about life on the Ship, so I thought I’d tell my story, starting with the Ship’s layout and our daily routines:

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Rowing Stations



Let’s start with the rowing quarters below deck. My job as a lead oarsman was to keep my oar to the rhythm, adjusting the length of the stroke and the angle of the blade to match the orders coming down from the bridge. I had initially been trained to follow the lead of my own mentor, Admiral Fiedler, and I took over with a rowing crew of my own when he was promoted to a

leadership position above deck. I was right-handed, so I sat on the port side, closest to the center. That way I could use my stronger arm with the most leverage. To the right of me was my left-handed rowing partner, Bianco. All lefties sat on the starboard benches, and every lead oarsman was lined up with their counterpart directly across from them. When a port or starboard turn was ordered, I had to watch Bianco closely to make sure we were providing just the right amount of give and take to see the Captain's directions through.

We held endless training exercises to ensure orders were followed instantly and precisely. "Back water," "Dip and hold," "Spurt!" Whatever command was issued, we reacted instinctively. We knew we would capsize if we couldn't quickly align the bow into the waves or get into the attack position to ram another vessel; our absolute adherence to each order was absolutely crucial. Sometimes it was a test, and other times it was a real battle for the survival of the Ship; we never knew whether or not it was going to be a drill; we were expected to react just as instinctively and energetically either way.

We couldn't see very far from our benches, but when the tarpaulins were up, we could catch a glimpse of the horizon where the waves met the sky. When a storm approached, or if another ship was sighted, we were ordered to pull down the tarps, which would sometimes billow in the wind. We could see faint shadows moving past us, and sometimes we heard the sounds of intense battles, but we could never really make out what was going on. It wasn't our job anyway; our role was to propel the ship to wherever it needed to go. Being below deck was the safest place for us, we were told, and we trusted the Captain and his officers to keep us safe. We had to make sure the tarps stayed down until the danger passed, which made a lot of sense, because we had been told that sailors on enemy ships were desperate to learn our secrets, and if we left the tarps up, they might see how we operated and figure out why we were so much swifter than the other ships in the sea. In reality, whenever the tarps came back up, I was always a bit disappointed to look around and see nothing but water; I wanted to catch a glimpse of at least some of the action, and I sometimes dreamed about what the lookout up in the crow's nest might be able to see from that vantage point.

Our ship was a quadrireme, with four oarsmen to each oar. Three right-handed cadets sat next to me, and three left-handed cadets sat by Bianco. Even though as the lead oarsmen, Bianco and I did a large share of the work, our cadets had to keep their hands on the oars at all times, even if they couldn't contribute much to the workload; the idea was that they could learn to work the oar through repetition and muscle memory. The right-handed oarsmen weren't any stronger than their lefty counterparts, but for some reason (that I admittedly could never quite figure out) all right-handed lead oarsmen were petty officers while left-handed oarsmen could never advance past the enlisted rank of Seaman First Class. "That's just the way it has always been," I was told when I once asked the question of Fiedler. Because of that tradition, I outranked Bianco, even though he instinctively seemed to know more about rowing than I did. If there was a disagreement, I was expected to hear him out, but he was expected to follow my lead, since I could pull rank with the final say in the decision. It had to work that way, Fiedler had told me, because when we went into battle, you couldn't just have everyone second-guessing each other.

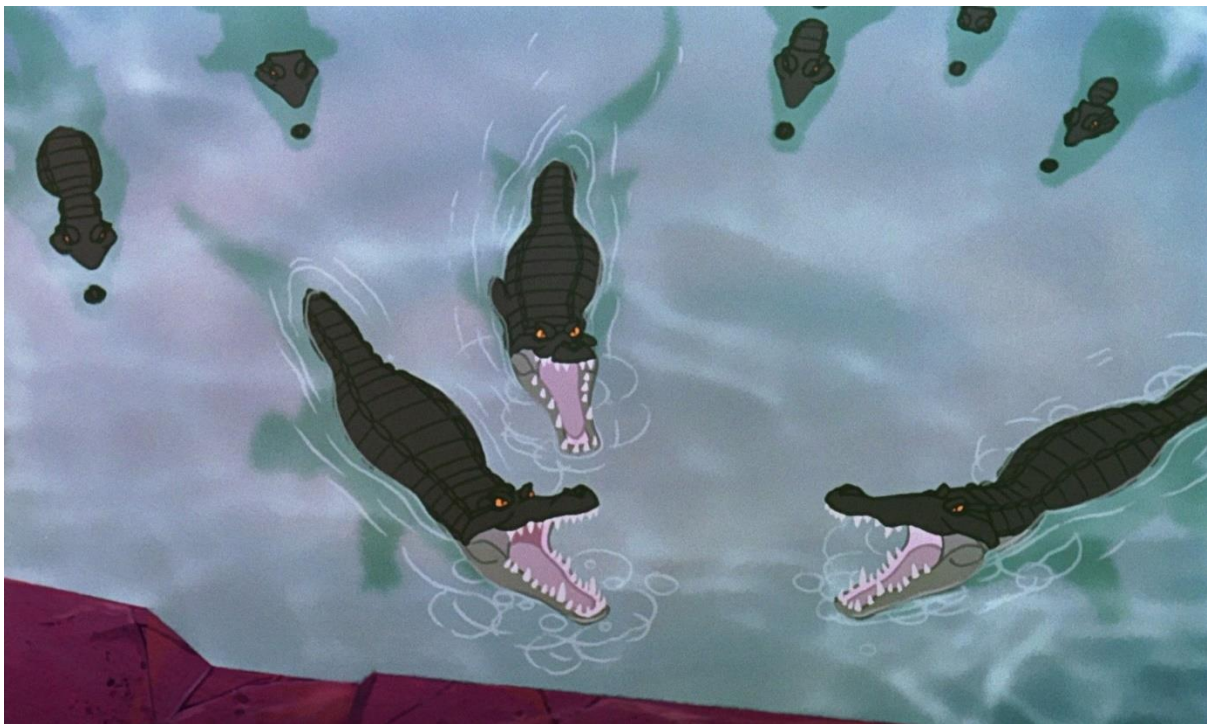
I took his word for it: I followed the drummer and Bianco followed me...at least that is how it was supposed to work...only for us it didn't quite work that way, because Bianco disagreed with the whole idea of the ranking system to begin with. His training had come on an oar where everyone spoke up with their opinions; if there was a disagreement, they weren't afraid to fight it out. I thought that sounded like chaos, and that eventually he would see that the established, hierarchal order of things was much more efficient. He never bought into the idea or the endless saluting at the

beginning and end of each shift, but even though our rowing patterns differed, I appreciated the advice he offered. We weren't a conventional team, but in the end we rocked it anyway!

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*Movie Night*

We all wore white uniforms at our rowing stations, but on movie night the lead oarsmen got to change into a navy-blue jacket. At the end of our shift we would line up for roll call where our commander, Warrant Officer Orville, would note our presence in his detailed logbook. We would then line up single-file at the entrance to the Ship's cinema, where Orville would check the stripes on our jackets to make sure only lead oarsmen could enter. "Did you row extra hard this week?" he would ask each sailor. As long as you nodded, you would earn yourself a cinema pass.

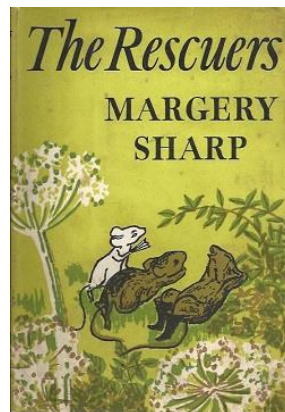
The Ship's cinema had a collection of classic Disney films with happy endings. Unfortunately, all but one of the films in the Ship's archives had been water damaged, so we could only gather the basic story lines from the promotional posters on the wall. The single film we could actually watch was about life aboard a sternwheeler in a scary, crocodile-infested swamp called Devil's Bayou. Because it was the only viewable movie in the collection, we watched it over and over again. It got a bit redundant, but we were all named after characters in the movie, so we would pay special attention when our eponyms would say their lines, which we were expected to memorize. After the movie, we'd break into designated groups, and Orville and the other officers would come around and quiz us on our lines and what new insights we had gained with the latest viewing.



My standard response was, "If you stray too far from the Ship, you'll get eaten by crocodiles." That answer always seemed to satisfy Orville enough to move along so we could talk about other, more diverse topics. At lunch in the galley the next day the other lead oarsmen would tell each other and their teams how much they enjoyed the movie, but our team never seemed that interested in it and tended to avoid the topic altogether unless pressed to speak up by a senior officer. Secretly, I think everyone else was bored with it, too, because I'd look around on movie night, and half the sailors who were supposedly watching it would be asleep while the rest were

looking at the other movie posters on the wall. If wandering eyes happened to cross, they would quickly look back at the main feature with a hint of embarrassment. Even if the movie itself was a bit mundane, the happy ending became the accepted goal behind our fervent strokes at the oars.

One of my cadets, Seaman Rufus, admitted to me one day that he had wanted to learn more about the wise old Rufus after whom he was named. He had checked out the original novel that the film was based on from the Ship's library, and even though he wasn't allowed in the cinema yet, he had documented a lot of changes that had been made between the book and the film version. When he asked the librarian about it, however, he had been told that the book was wrong about those details, and that the differences in the film were actually mistakes in the original, printed version of the book that had since been corrected and restored in the motion picture. That claim seemed like quite preposterous to me. The fact that the book was set in a fjord rather than a swamp, and that the action took place in a wintry castle rather than a river boat seemed like major discrepancies, but in the end I brushed them aside, since I had never seen anything even remotely resembling a fjord, a swamp, a castle, or a river boat with my own eyes.



Rufus told me he had been reprimanded for calling the book a novel, when, in fact, *The Rescuers* was a non-fiction history book about the young, adventurous author's personal journey from Devil's Bayou to the big city of Sellas. The book itself was unbelievable enough, but the movie seemed to stretch things further. Rufus had been told, though, that any apparent discrepancies could be explained by the water-damaged frames that had been spliced out of the movie reel and had to be substituted in with remastered frames. Any remaining concerns could be dismissed with the changing definitions of the book's archaic terms like *fjord* and *castle* that had very complicated Old Norse and Latin word roots and actually meant the same thing as the movie depiction if you could trace it back far enough.

All details aside, I could never quite resolve the reality of talking mice. And try as I might, I really couldn't imagine dry land as a real place, where the mystical Sellas City's glistening skyscrapers were as beautiful as the swamp was scary. Eventually we would get to ride up the elevator of a towering glass building ourselves someday, we were told, but only if we memorized the clues in the movie that we would need to remember if we were to find our way on the day.

I was always left the cinema with more questions than answers, but when the discussions started diving too deeply into the details, the officers would herd us through the kitchen – the galley of the galley – where they always had great snacks for dessert. We would quickly forget about the inconsistencies, and if the seas were calm enough, we'd get to play ping pong in the adjacent game room. Those who hadn't missed a beat on the oars that week got a special token they could use to get a puzzle from the game room cabinet. Only us righties got the tokens, which didn't seem fair to

me at first; but sometimes I heard the lefties talking, and I got the impression that they felt the puzzles were a silly waste of time. According to one conversation I overheard, the lefties were actually glad the puzzles kept us righties busy so they could have time to play games of their own that they enjoyed much more. It sounds a bit dysfunctional from where I sit today, but all in all, we did have some great parties on board.

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The Library

Despite the fun festivals, I ended up spending much of my precious free time in the Ship's library, studying the great naval battles of the past. Most of these battles had occurred long before any of us could remember, but we had heard the legendary stories repeated during our nightly pep rallies. The stories seemed to get more and more impressive with each repetition, and I wondered how accurate they might be given the number of times they had already been repeated by the time I began my own tenure as a tenderfoot oarsman and started getting invited to the rallies myself. I took a great interest in the original records, but when I ran across the actual accounts of the individual campaigns in the library, I was surprised to learn that every time there had been a major battle, the Ship had actually started out fighting for the wrong side. In every case, we ended up switching sides just before defeat was imminent – and then the Ship's historian proceeded to rewrite the official captain's log from the new victors' perspective.

Every once in a while, an artist would be brought in to sort out the old Captain's logs, altering those parts that would otherwise implicate the Ship with complicity in defeated agendas. The alteration station was well stocked with white-out, big fat sharpies, and a range of right-handed scissors. The desk was conspicuously located right next to the fire pit.

As I looked at the pictures of the succession of head librarians on the wall, most of the spots were blank, and there were obvious gaps in the dates. I dug a little deeper and found that invariably, the head librarians would get disgusted with the artist's "restoration" of priceless historical manuscripts, their concerns would be dismissed by their commanding officers, and they would either jump off the ship or get thrown off the ship by the Captain's inner circle of officers. Whenever there was a vacancy for a librarian after a purge, the Captain would send in one of his navigation officers to lock up certain cabinets, burn a few suspicious books, and temporarily take the librarian's place while they looked for qualified replacements. Interestingly, only these substitute librarians still had their pictures on the wall by the time I started visiting.

I found these details to be troubling but fascinating at the same time, and I continued to search for more answers. My favorite place to study was in the library's map room. On the map room wall was an oversize master plan of the all of the Ship's journeys to date. According to the map, the Ship had begun its journey at a dry dock in the land of Preckstence. On the opposite side, the map showed more dry land with Mount Sellas and its namesake, Sellas City, as the plotted destination; in between was nothing but open ocean. The Ship's course was plotted as a single line, but I knew from my own studies that there had been substantial deviations in the past. As I looked closer at the map, I could see that each of these off-course lines had been erased in favor of the single line that had been reproduced in the daily flyers that were distributed to the oarsmen.

The map on the wall had been signed by Captain Comoros himself. I asked the librarian about the sources he had used for the detailed depictions of Mount Sellas, and I was told they had come from original drawings by Captain Smitty, the first captain of the vessel. I found a fragment of the original map in the special collections archive, and I was surprised to find that it was actually a

drawing rather than a map. The drawing showed some formations rising from the water that Captain Smitty had seen when he climbed up to the crow's nest one day. To me it just looked like a unique cloud formation that had been mistaken for a mountain, and the dry land around the mountain looked like sea foam from breaking waves. It sure didn't look much like the drawings and maps that I had seen in the printed flyers. In those depictions, Mount Sellas had trees and waterfalls and granite cliffs. I looked through the drawings that had been produced by the captains who followed Smitty and found that they had sketched in these details in the areas missing from Captain Smitty's drawing. The enhanced drawings gave the oarsmen the confidence to keep rowing, and the altered maps highlighted how much progress we were making on our journey; Orville and his fellow drum-beating officers frequently referred to these documents to summon the extra effort required of each oarsman if the Ship was going to reach the shores of Mount Sellas.

I was struggling to see the relevance of the drawings to any sort of land mass, but the librarian then showed me a signed affidavit stating that Smitty's junior officers had witnessed the same sight as he had, proclaiming dry land to be a reality. That sounded promising, but when I kept digging I found out that they later explained that they hadn't actually seen it, but had dreamed about the very same shapes that Smitty had drawn that very same night, so they were convinced that Sellas was a real mountain.

That new revelation had my head spinning, and I asked the librarian if there was anything else that might help substantiate the claims. He seemed to get agitated at this request and explained that attempts at substantiation were viewed negatively by the bridge, to say the least. He explained further that one of the captains who followed in Smitty's role had run into a ship that was part of a scientific expedition; he roped up with them briefly and brought their chief meteorologist, Antonio, on board to have a look at the drawing. He took the unusual step of inviting the whole crew up to the deck to hear the announcement, expecting to get confirmation of the map's authenticity from an expert. Antonio, however, quickly realized the shapes in the drawing had all of the characteristics of cumulonimbus clouds, which sometimes appear to look like mountains to those who had never seen them before. He found a number of distinguishing features of the clouds and the wave crests that couldn't possibly exist on dry land. Furthermore, they had a catalogue of similar sketches made by the crews of other ships that showed the shape changing over time and moving in the direction of the prevailing wind. His other colleagues all agreed with the assessment, and the gathering on deck was quickly canceled under the guise of a contagious disease before the scientist could speak. The oarsmen were sent back below deck, and future deck gatherings for enlisted men were done away with entirely. We parted ways with the other ship and have avoided scientific expeditions ever since, citing the potential for an infectious outbreak.

This had all occurred before my time on the Ship, but I had never heard about it from Fiedler, Orville, Comoros, or anyone else. "Why weren't we told about this?" I asked.

"Because that information, frankly, just isn't very useful," the librarian replied.

"Useful for what?" I asked, "We're following a fake map, and the only parts that even look remotely like dry land were added in later."

"Look, the scientific findings don't prove anything," he argued, "our own on-board weatherman had a look and said that the clouds must have been obscuring the mountain; the reason they look like the mountain is because they were moving around the shape of the real, rock-solid mountain behind them."

"But the entire formation was moving with the wind," I said, "What do you make of that?"

“Haven’t you heard of shape-shifting mountains?” the librarian asked, “Oh, of course not, you’re just an oarsman and they never taught you about magma and other concepts of advanced geology.”

“Maybe not,” I replied, “but from what I do know, that would take thousands of years – this one moved in a few hours!”

“OK, listen,” the librarian countered, “here’s the real scoop: Captain Smitty didn’t want us to have the whole map, because he knew he’d have to test his sailors to see if they were up to the task of following orders.”

“So the drawings aren’t mountains after all,” I asked, “and this is all just a test?”

“It isn’t that difficult, is it?” the librarian explained, “Even an oarsman can understand that when Smitty drew the waves and the clouds that he actually saw, he had actually been thinking about the actual mountains at the end of the sea, so his interpretation is actually correct...in the end”

“But...”

“Look,” the librarian said, “You’re just going to have to trust me on this one. So just stop asking so many questions and get back to your oar. That’s a direct order!”

I didn’t think a librarian would outrank me, but when I hesitated, he pointed to the certificate on his wall that included a sealed statement: “Whether it is the librarian’s order or the Captain’s, it is the same.”

I saw that the discussion wasn’t going anywhere, and I felt a little seasick to boot, so I obeyed the order and went back to my rowing station. Every time someone would see a light on the horizon, rumors would spread that it was coming from the lighthouse at the end of the Sellas City pier, and everyone would row extra hard. Nobody seemed dismayed or dissuaded when it turned out to be lightning or lanterns on passing ships every single time, but I began to lower my expectations. Day after day as I sat at my oar, I couldn’t help but to wonder whether we were just aiming for waves and clouds that had simply been mistaken for dry land.

Only ranking officers had the right to walk the deck. I knew that oarsmen belonged below deck, but occasionally I’d venture out and wander around to have a look. I’d often see features with my own eyes that looked remarkably like dry land. But if I looked long enough, I would see them roll away or dissipate into mist, exposing their composition as nothing more than waves and clouds. The curving lines that I could have sworn at first glance were the outlines of foothills ended up just being darker clouds.

I could certainly understand how we all found ourselves in the same boat, chasing an illusion, but after a few of these deck-scapades I didn’t feel even remotely connected to that vision anymore.

Every time we engaged another vessel in a fierce battle, the Ship’s officers would distribute a daily, printed flyer to the oarsmen focussing on how the Ship is definitely on the right side of the battle. Given the rumbling sounds of cannon fire and flashes of light that I could sometimes see coming from the horizon, I got the sense that there were some even greater battles ahead, and I really hoped those navigating the course had learned some lessons from the previous conflicts that were really just masked victories.

In his morning monologues that were broadcast around the Ship, Captain Comoros kept telling us the Ship was destined for victory in the battles ahead; but given the history I had studied in the library, I was never quite sure myself whether we would enter the next battle fighting for a just cause. Oarsmen don't get to ask questions, though; I knew my job was to follow the beat of the drum, and to trust that the guy up in the crow's nest could serve as the eyes for the rest of us below deck, so I kept right on rowing on.



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*The Crow's Nest*

One day Nerus, the Ship's chief security officer, saw me standing near the rail, looking off at the horizon.

"What are you doing up here?" he asked, "Shouldn't you be rowing?"

"Don't worry," I answered, "I'm not planning to jump."

According to the word below deck, an increasing number of sailors had been jumping overboard, so Nerus and his troops now spent most of their time talking people down from the rails.



"I'm glad to hear you're staying on board," Officer Nerus said, "Best to not even dip your feet in the water, cause them sharks will rip 'em right off...that is, if they don't pull your whole body in first!"

"Really?" I said, "I heard it's not that bad out there after all."

"Look for yourself," he said, shaking his head "it's all grey and dim."

"Well, some sailors say there are beautiful colors under the waves."

"Who are you going to believe?" he asked, "a bunch of rumors spreading around below deck, or the Lookout, who can see down through the water from the crow's nest?"

"Well, if I ever get to meet him face to face, I'll have to ask," I said,

"Believe me," Nerus said, pointing out to the sea, "There's nothing out there for those who decide to leave."

"What if you climb up higher?" I asked, "I've heard you can also see the peak of Mount Sellas along with all of the other ships out there from the crow's nest."

"That's right," he said, "but only the Lookout is allowed up there. Whatever you do, stay off the masts!"

"How come I've never seen him?"

"The Lookout? Of course you can't see him," Nerus replied, "because we can only look at the crow's nest from the bottom! But if you listen very closely, every time he sees land, you'll hear him say 'Land Ahoy.'"

The next day I decided to climb up the ropes and ask the Lookout what he could see. When I reached the crow's nest, though, I couldn't see anyone inside at all. I was about to head back down to let my oar team know that the crow's nest was empty when I saw something move. There was a figure under the blanket; I looked underneath and found a sailor huddled inside on the floor.

"Are you the Lookout?" I asked.

"That's what my contract says," he answered.

"So are you the one saying 'Land Ahoy' and pointing your light ahead?"

"That's me."

"But have you actually seen dry land?"

"What's that?" he asked.

"What's what?"

"Dry land," he answered, "I'm not familiar with that concept."

"Are you serious?" I asked, "So why do you keep saying 'land ahoy?'"

"Look, the lines are spelled out right here in my contract," he said, handing me a piece of paper from his pocket.

Sure enough, the duties outlined in his job description said that when he felt a raindrop, he needed to blow his whistle three times and say, "Land ahoy, straight ahead."

“But why not have a look around for yourself?” I asked.

“What are you crazy? I’m not looking out there!” he said, “I’m afraid of heights...and I could get salt water in my eyes – that really stings!”

I was totally stunned. Whenever storms had come in the past, we all believed the lookout had coincidentally just spotted the harbor, and we rowed all that much harder to get there. While I was cooped up below deck, scrubbing down the benches or furiously working the oar, I had always thought that someone had actually seen land. I had assumed that at least the Lookout could see farther than the rest of us; but it turned out he wasn’t even looking.

“You shouldn’t be up here,” he said, “It’s really dangerous. You could fall and break your neck!”

“So could you!” I countered.

“Not if I keep myself down here on the floor,” he said, “Besides, the Captain says I’m needed up here. Doesn’t it make everyone below deck feel good to hear me say my lines?”

“Well sure, but...”

“Wait, I felt a raindrop,” he said, blowing his whistle three times. He then shouted resolutely, “Land ahoy, straight ahead!”

All I could do was shake my head at my previous naivety. I climbed back down to the deck and looked over the edge at the threatening waves.

“So I see you climbed the ropes,” Officer Nerus said, having spotted me again.

I wasn’t in the mood to hear his reprimands.

“That’s fine, feel free to jump now, or stay aboard; it’s your choice,” he said, “But if you stay on board, we expect you to keep quiet about what you saw. It could be bad for morale if you start spouting off any crazy theories about what you think you saw up there.”

I nodded my head, not wanting to get in a confrontation in which he would just pull in more of his cohorts to back up his position. If I couldn’t even speak up to Nerus, how did I ever think I’d have the guts to jump overboard?

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The Machine Shop

I went back to the dry safety of my routine and debated telling Bianco about what I had seen, but I was afraid he would jump without me, so I kept my mouth shut. Something inside of me I started having nightmares about being trapped inside the sinking ship as it went under. I’d wake up, feeling like I was suffocating. If the ship was off course, heading for the shoals, or facing unwinnable battles ahead, maybe we’d be better off taking our chances in the open sea after all!

Day after day, we kept rowing – presumably toward Sellas – but my heart wasn’t in it anymore. I had previously tried to catch any glimpse of light coming through my oar’s porthole, but after these discoveries, I began to find myself just looking downward while I rowed. As I stared at the floor stroke after stroke, I started feeling the contents of my pockets cutting off my circulation: Just like all the other lead oarsmen, I kept a compass in my left pocket and a keyring in the right one. I had grown so accustomed to their presence that I had stopped noticing them anymore, but now my

legs were starting to feel bruised, and I began to question the purpose for carrying the compass and keyring with me everywhere – even when I slept.

On the first day of rowing training, every sailor was given a compass as a precious gift to take care of. For some odd reason, from Day 1 my compass had always been defective. Everyone around me kept telling me theirs worked perfectly – pointing to Sellas like a good compass should – and I trusted their readings completely. But the needle on mine was stuck, so whichever way I pointed the compass, that's the way the needle pointed, too. I thought of taking it apart to see what was wrong with it, but we had all been warned not to try to repair the compasses ourselves. The standard protocol was to hand a broken compass over to the authorized machinists in the shop for repair. Those who opened their compasses on their own could never seem to be able to put them back together again. These do-it-yourselfers also had a tendency of deliberately smashing theirs to bits after their failed repair attempts – a crime that would get you thrown overboard with all hands on deck to watch.

I didn't tell anyone mine was a dud, and I never turned it in to the shop, because if you admitted that your compass was broken, you'd be assigned all sorts of remedial training courses on compass repair and related topics that I didn't want to deal with. My compass had never worked in the first place, but most of the people who were sent to the repair course had dropped or otherwise damaged their own compass through their own negligence or dereliction, so they had to go all the way back to the first *Caring for your Compass* course that the trainees had to take as an induction. Sailors whose compasses worked perfectly would come in as guest lecturers, but from what I heard, they would usually just gloat about how well theirs worked rather than offering any real assistance. You could earn bonus game room tokens for referring someone to the class, so those with functional compasses would eagerly try to identify those with inactive compasses so they could be herded into the remedial courses. Frankly, I just didn't want the attention, but now that I think about it, maybe I just wanted to avoid the label of being a compass-breaker; in any case, I kept my mouth shut.

It never seemed odd to me that all compasses pointed toward the direction of travel, because Captain Comoros had told us that any working compass would always point toward Mount Sellas, confirming our trajectory with a unanimous consensus. He told us the compasses worked because Sellas was a hellamagnetic mountain, whatever that was. The more I thought about it, though, the more my thoughts landed on the trumpeted figurehead at the bow of the Ship. I had seen her depicted in artwork, where she looked like painted wood, but she wasn't visible from the deck. It wasn't until I saw her golden trumpet glistening from the crow's nest that I realized the figure itself was cast out of iron. Maybe she was skewing the compasses, so that the needles of the compass weren't pointing at a destination at all but rather just the front of the Ship. If that was indeed the case, no matter where the Captain steered the ship, the compasses would all point in that direction!

I decided to have a look for myself during my next deck-scurion. When I looked around the figurehead, I found it connected to a wire that was coiled around the bowsprit. I didn't know much about ferromagnetic materials or electrification at the time, but I did know enough to suspect that the bow of the Ship was purposely being magnified. I got the sinking feeling that we had been traveling in circles all along rather than following a straight course to Sellas!



When I traced the wire in the opposite direction, I found that the other end ran straight into the on-board mechanic's shop. I never actually saw inside of the machine shop myself, because you needed a special badge to get in, but I knew the shop had one job: churning out a personalized key for every sailor, past and present. Each key was custom-made and engraved with the initials of its recipient. You received your own key upon your promotion to lead oarsman. You would receive a written notice that your key was ready; then, when you knocked on the door to pick up the key, the shopkeeper would open a hatch and quiz you on your loyalty. In order to get your key, you had to swear a lifelong oath to the Captain, saying that you would never, ever, ever step aboard another ship. That request sounded a bit paranoid to me when I was asked to repeat it in unison with the other candidates, but the weirdest part about the induction was the part where they took you over to the brig where one of the cells housed a caged crocodile. The cage's gate had a padlock on it, and the shopkeeper would issue a warning to those who drop their key: Should your key ever find its way to the floor, your dropped key would be turned over to Nerus, who would use that key to open the cage; the croc would then hunt you down and sink its teeth into your throat, rip out your larynx, pull you overboard, drown you in a death roll, and leave what's left of your rotting carcass to be devoured by a shark. And if you thought it was over then, the shark would be caught by pirates, its own carcass hauled onto the pirate ship's deck and slaughtered; your remains would then be exhumed and tossed into the ocean to be eaten by the next shark in a continuing cycle that would never, ever, ever end.

It seemed like an unnecessarily gruesome depiction, but to make it extra disturbing, you were supposed to look directly into one of the croc's yellow eyes while they rattled off the description of your horrid fate should you fail in your duties. I wasn't sure I wanted to agree to the terms, since I questioned whether I'd be able to hold onto the keys until we made it to the dock; but the bleak imagery of failure was quickly contrasted with the sunshine and rainbows of success: if you managed to hold on to your key by the time we all made it to the dock at the foot of Mount Sellas, you could use it to unlock a gate to all of the glorious awesomeness of dry land.

Apparently saying yes to the terms right then and there was the only way to avoid being stuck on the dock forever without a key; besides, my own mentors had gone through the process before me, and they actually had working compasses. So when my own time came to take my vows, I figured I'd just go for it: I looked that croc right in the eye said yes!

With that concession I was granted admission to the cinema and was issued a keyring with a single key. In the end, the single key was just the beginning: The oversized keyring wasn't just intended to hold my own key but rather a whole set of additional keys that each oarsman was

supposed to collect during their voyage. Oarsmen who had previously manned the very same oar we gripped each day had carved their initials into the wood, and we had a duty to identify them. Sometimes we would spend hours after our shift taking rubbings of the oar to see if we could spot the initials of our predecessors. When we found one, we would bring the paper with the rubbing to the machine shop, knock on the door, and hand it through the slot. A few hours later, we'd get a key that was engraved with the initials we had found on the oar. Sometimes the initials we found on the oars were indecipherable, and some of them looked remarkably like termite tracks, but we'd cash them in just the same.

Captain Comoros had told us that when we reached the dock, the oarsmen who had rowed before our time would all be waiting there for us; the machine shop had only been added to the Ship for our current voyage, so none of the previous oarsmen had the chance to get their own key. If we hadn't found their initials, we were told that they'd be stuck on the dock forever, unable to step onto dry land. If we had a key for them on our keychain, on the other hand, they'd get to accompany us through the gate at the end of the dock. What a stroke of luck – and an honored duty – that we happened to be assigned to the only vessel in the sea capable of turning out keys!

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*The Soundtrack*

Once a sailor had sworn his allegiance to Captain Comoros and received his key, that commitment came with a duty to watch the Rescuers every night for the rest of our time on the Ship. The journey depicted in the film was supposed to be symbolic of our own voyage across the sea; the other lead oarsmen were always trying to find any similarities between the two – whether they made sense or not – and I gave it my best shot as well.

The movie started with scenes from the mad, mad, cruel world of Devil's Bayou that Margery had escaped as a young girl:



Although life on the Ship was supposed to be ideal, compared to the destination we were heading toward, it was as dark and bleak as the cruel world of Devil's Bayou – in a symbolically relative sort of sense. The haunting movie scenes of the decrepit river boat in the bayou were accompanied by a song called "The Journey":

*I'm lost at sea without a friend,  
This journey, will it ever end?  
Who will rescue me?  
Rescue me!*

After the spooky opening scenes, Margery embarks on an adventurous journey in the film, after which the lost wanderer is finally united with her forever family. The closing scenes show rainbows, serene beaches, palm trees, symbols of freedom and opportunity, and the great big glass building that we would all be living in someday.



These scenes were accompanied by another song of hope that starkly contrasted with the despondent opening lyrics:

*Come along, sing a song,  
Winter day becomes tomorrow,  
Will we find joy or sorrow?  
Sing a song, is it wrong?  
To put all our hopes together and wish for something better?  
Is it wrong, to belong?  
To face the future with another who means more than any other is to belong.  
We'll paint the grey clouds with pretty rainbow hues,  
And we'll brush the gloom away and save it for a rainy day.  
Oh today, if troubles cast a shadow,  
And shadows make the sun afraid to stay, it's okay!  
Cause there'll be sunshine shining and we'll find the silver lining another day.*

*How I hope you'll always stay,  
Tomorrow is another day!*

Some oarsmen drew their strength from the rich reward they expected to reap in Sellas City; while others drew their motivation from avoiding awful consequences. I have to admit that I liked the motion picture soundtrack and the clips about the glorious bounty at the end of a challenging voyage, but I could never get Medusa's malicious crocodiles in the opening scene out of my mind. Most of my shipmates seemed to be able just focus on the final song about looking forward to a latter-day tomorrow, but I kept coming back to the drastic consequences of failure. Why couldn't I just let that go like everyone else? Why couldn't I smile that frown away with a cheery disposition?

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The Meetings

We held weekly motivational training meetings that were intended to boost morale, but they were filled with warnings of shipwrecks and sea monsters and other reasons to stay on the only unsinkable ship in the whole sea – and the only one with any reliable means of staying on course. In these meetings, we would greet each other and part ways again with the same phrase: "Land ahoy!" I felt a bit funny saying it, since I pictured us striking an iceberg or other floating debris at any instant – and likely with no advance warning whatsoever – given the ineptitude of the Lookout we were all trusting as our means to stay on course!

On every new moon, we would hold a trajectory confirmation meeting in which we were all supposed to turn to each other, shake hands, and say, "Margery F. Sharp was a true seafarer." I still wasn't sold on the idea of talking mice and some of the other details of her account, though, so I'd switch the words around when it was my turn to speak. I'd say, for example, that "Officer Sharp was a very, very important writer," but I couldn't quite bring myself to say the word *seafarer*, because I really had no idea whether the author had actually undertaken the journey she described. She had written about a girl named Penny, which we were told had been her nickname at the time; but given the substantial differences Rufus had uncovered, I started wondering if Penny might have been a fictional rather than an autobiographical character all along. The more I thought about it, the more I realized that even if it was all true, the big glass building we were all supposed to live in someday in wasn't my thing at all, even if it did have sprawling views of Sellas.

My picture of paradise was something completely different, for some reason that I can't explain anymore, I kept right on singing songs about Sellas as I rowed away to the beat of the drum in spite of all of my countering inclinations. Maybe I just preferred the company of my shipmates to the lonely, solitary ocean. With every stroke, though, my compass and keyring started seeming more and more trivial to me. When I looked at my pockets, I couldn't help thinking that if the Lookout actually *looked out* at the horizon, maybe he'd spot something worthwhile after all. And maybe whatever he might spot would be more worthy of pursuit than the illusion of Sellas that we were supposedly steering toward!

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### *The Wheel*

In all my days on the Ship, only right-handed sailors had ever taken the wheel. On occasion, though, one of the left-handed sailors would ask to help steer the Ship.

"The wheel is designed for right-handed steering," the dissenting voices were told.

I always thought that was a weird excuse, since the wheel was round and symmetrical, after all. I figured maybe the prevailing current must tend to veer the ship to the left, so a stronger right arm might be beneficial. Whatever the reason, I assumed it was valid and shrugged it off.

Besides, it all balanced out in the end, anyway: The pots, pans, scissors and other tools in the galley, the sick bay, and the uniform repair shop were designed specifically for left-handed use, which meant that lefties were better suited to be appointed with roles as cooks and caregivers and tailors. Occasionally they would also be appointed to a committee tasked with organising one on-board activity or another; but lefties as a rule weren't granted the authority to make decisions of any consequence or to touch the wheel at all.

One day, some outspoken lefties decided it was time for a change and staged a protest. Their leaders were promptly thrown off the ship and the remaining protesters were told to fall in line or suffer the same consequence. Most fell in line, fearing the turbulent water. I was at my oar at the time, but I heard a voice in the water shout, "It's actually nice out here, you should try it!" I saw a few heads turn, but nobody was about to join them.

I moved the tarp to sneak a peek and saw a glimpse of the castaways between the waves, were swimming off in search of another vessel. I thought I heard one of them shout, "Fine, I didn't like your ship anyway!" but the splashing of our oars soon drowned out the voices.

Some of the sailors started getting quite concerned about the fate of the "lefty saboteurs" as they had been designated.

"Don't worry," the Captain said in an official flyer that was distributed to the oarsmen in response, "They'll be picked up by another ship that lets lefties steer."

That consolation helped ease some nerves below deck, but in the officer's meetings above us, they bemoaned the loss. Sure, the radical lefties might get picked up, they acknowledged, but the officers all believed there wasn't a single other ship in the sea with a certified Lookout, one who could see the signals coming from the Harbormaster and the Lighthouse Operator that could help their ship plot a safe course for Sellas. It was clear to them that the dissidents were never going to arrive in Sellas at all: Their rightful rooms in the big glass building were going to remain empty and boarded up forever! They held a symbolic burial-at-sea ceremony, washing their hands of the treachery. It was a time of mourning, but we were told that it was in our best interest to jettison the poisonous notions that threatened the fate of the Ship. We all accepted the fact that an even worse fate would have awaited the entire crew had a lefty been allowed to touch the wheel and capsize the whole vessel!

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The Castaways

Captain Comoros had always been very methodical about the seating arrangement, but after the lefty revolt, he enforced it even more strictly: lefties on the right, and righties on the left. That way when you picked your rowing partner, you'd be able to help keep things nice and symmetrical, and the Ship wouldn't ever veer off course.

Sometimes a lefty would defy orders and try to choose another lefty as their rowing partner. They would promptly be re-seated by the commanding officer.

"You're supposed to be right-handed," I heard Orville shout to one of the lefties who found himself on the wrong side of the Ship one day.

“No I’m not,” he said.

“Are too!” Orville replied, “Now get back where you belong!”

In keeping with Orville’s orders, the poor sailor spent the rest of his days on board trying to tone up his right arm in an attempt to make himself right-handed. Although he quietly complied in public, he vented his frustration in his logbook; each entry started out with indecipherable characters that he formed while trying to adhere to the mandate, but usually ended with more legible text written with the more comfortable, dominant hand. I thought it was a bit absurd that anyone would try to tell a sailor whether they were right-handed or left-handed; it just seemed like something you just knew inside. I felt comfortable in my assigned position, so I never questioned the protocol any further myself.

One day we crossed paths with a ship flying a bright, colorful flag. The ship was veering to port on a collision course with our bearing. We could have easily steered around it, but the Captain instructed us to stay on course and ram right through it at full speed. I peeked through the tarp once again and saw rainbow flags in the wreckage behind us. It seemed entirely unnecessary, but Orville told us we needed to teach others a lesson about meandering courses to keep the seas safer for everyone. Besides, the Captain reported that the Lookout had received the instructions to ram the ship straight from the Harbormaster himself, beamed through a coded signal of flashing lights that could only be seen from the crow’s nest.

From what I had seen while climbing the ropes, that scenario didn’t seem remotely plausible; but as time passed, I stopped giving the incident much thought. Then one day we encountered a whole flotilla of colorful ships. This time, it was clear that we were outnumbered and outsized; we couldn’t possibly stay afloat if we tried to sail straight through. On orders from the Harbormaster – relayed to the Captain by the Lookout – we steered around them in a sweeping arc. In our pep rally that night, we got a lecture about how the seas were being overrun with vessels that couldn’t steer straight.

We were no longer safe, and given the dangers of listing one way or another with an off-balance ship, we were warned that it was high time to clean house on our own ship. Those oarsmen who had tried to sit on the wrong side of the centerline were charged with particularly grievous crimes. They were taken above deck and whipped while everyone watched in a special ceremony. Those who didn’t renounce their crime were keelhaunched in the hopes that they would be cured when they came back up on the other side of the Ship. Most never came out the other side, though, having cut themselves loose in the hopes of swimming off to find a less arrogant crew.

One morning as I was about to start my rowing shift, I heard an awful ruckus from up above and a lot of splashing down below. Bianco told me that the Captain had decided that any cadet who had been rowing with two lefties or two righties on their team had to go, not for the sake of the Ship but for their own sake as they would be too confused to be of any benefit to our manual propulsion system. I didn’t believe it, but I left my post and ran up to the deck to check. Sure enough, the security officers were tossing the junior cadets overboard. A few sailors with standard teams decided to jump overboard in protest, but the rest of us just sat there and watched it happen. I felt like I should speak up, but the water looked really cold, and by the time I gathered up enough courage to take a stand, the whole episode had all passed. The Ship steered straighter after this incident, but it had lost a substantial amount of power.

There was a bit of grumbling, but the Captain passed around a flyer stating how the order to dump the young cadets had once again come straight from the crow’s nest. Keeping the

troublemakers on board until they became lead oarsmen would send the whole ship off course, so it was best to jettison any ballast that promoted asymmetry.

This incident just didn't seem right, and the whole thing really tore at me. How could the Lookout have seen the signal, anyway? Instead of placing the blame on a delusional captain, though, I doubted my doubts and looked for any explanation I could concoct. Maybe the Lookout had a peephole through which he could see the Harbormaster's signal; maybe my broken compass was the problem after all.

I decided to tell Fiedler about my useless instrument. "Do you think I should turn it in for repair?" I asked.

"Don't bother," he said, "even if you get it fixed, it will just point to the front of the Ship."

I was stunned. "So you know about the magnetic figurehead?" I asked.

"Sure," he said, "Lots of people know about it. But as long as everyone else believes their gadgets are working, it keeps the oar teams happy and occupied with a challenge. What else are we going to do all day? Better to be rowing than swimming for your life!"

"But when everyone says they know Margery F. Sharp is a true seafarer, do you believe it?"

"Nope, she made it up."

"The whole movie?"

"No," he said, "other people made that up. She only made up the book."

"So why do you say it?" I asked.

"Well, I don't actually say it. I move my lips, but I don't exhale. So I'm not actually lying."

"So shouldn't we tell everyone else and pull down the wires?" I asked.

"No!" Fiedler said, "Even though it skews our readings, that wiring also acts as a lightning rod, which protects us all in the end. Without it, we'd go down in flames in the next thunderstorm."

Boy did I have a lot to think about after this revelation!





The Jump

Even though I no longer felt like anyone's compasses were giving valid readings, I believed Fiedler's stories about the dangers of the open sea and decided that we were better off staying on board than any other alternative. That's the mindset I found myself in when I went above deck one evening to have a look around and saw Bianco standing on the rail, looking down at the water. He had actually been talking about jumping off the Ship since I had first met him when we took our positions as rowing counterparts, but I didn't think he would actually do it. I gave him a direct order to come down, but he had already made up his mind.

Knowing that he would regret this decision someday, I snuck up behind him and clipped a tether line to his belt just in time. Sure enough, he jumped, but once he hit the water, the lifeline dragged him behind the boat. Surprised to find himself clipped in, he shouted to me that he was drowning out there and that I should cut him loose. Instead, I pulled harder to try to draw him back in. He finally threatened to cut the line himself, so I made the fateful call to jump in after him, with the intention of pulling both of us back to safety on the Ship. I held on to the lifeline for a while once I reached him, but as I struggled for breath in the turbulence of the Ship's wake, I soon realized we were now both in over our heads.

"See, this isn't where we want to be," I shouted, "We're going to drown!"

"I was already drowning on the Ship," he replied between waterlogged breaths.

"Come on, let's get back in the Ship," I begged, "It's way too dangerous out here!"

"We're only sinking because you won't let go of the line," he said, "Trust me!"

I felt torn inside, but our survival depended on it, so I got out my pocketknife and cut the line. Spinning in the wake was terrifying, and I got completely disoriented in the process, but when we stopped moving, I was surprised to find a calm sea.

"What about the rest of our team?" Bianco asked.

We looked back at the Ship and were surprised to see that our apprentices had been watching the whole thing unfold from the poop deck.

"The water is nice!" we called to them.

I thought they might go back to their cozy cabins, but instead, they trusted us and jumped overboard to follow us into the dark. Eventually we all found each other and huddled close together, glad to have our whole oar team in one piece.

I heard Fiedler's voice wishing me well, but others were begging us to return, throwing us lifelines they were hoping we would grab. Orville shouted a return order that he was relaying straight from Comoros, but I frankly wasn't even listening anymore.

I knew there would be some ceremonial mourning on board, but we felt at peace. We started picking up floating pieces of debris to build our own boat and eventually put together the comfortable little raft that we find ourselves in today. Those first few days were disconcerting, but it was exciting at the same time. Given the open sea all around us, we didn't know which direction we should take, or whether we should bother paddling at all.

As we discussed our options, we realized we had jumped just in the nick of time, given that our senior apprentice, Seaman Evinrude, was getting initiated for his own new role as a lead oarsman. If he had been manning his own oar when we jumped, we wouldn't have had a chance of being all together. We spoke with each of our cadets to find out where they wanted to go, but my first question was what they were doing up on the deck in the first place – against Orville's orders! I was stunned to hear that they had each been sneaking up to the deck for quite some time – some of them since long before I had started venturing out myself – and as it turned out, they hadn't mentioned their sauntering for fear of disappointing me. We obviously had a lot to catch up on, but we now had plenty of unregimented time to do it; finding out what they really thought of life on the Ship was eye-opening to say the least!

Speaking of eye-opening, the first time I dipped my head underwater, I was afraid it might get bitten off, but as I looked around and saw the vibrant sea life and colorful underwater reefs, it was the complete opposite of what I expected to find. There's a whole world under the sea with creatures I never imagined. I was told you'd get eaten by predatory sea monsters if you even dipped your toes in the water, much less put your head underwater. I was told the drab water itself held a meaningless, monotone void of nothingness. What I see under the water instead was a beautiful, diverse expanse of reefs and marine life. Now we've all taken up diving, and we enjoy looking around and then sharing what we saw on our dives with each other. I guess the main insight that we've gained is that we really do enjoy each other's company here in our little raft.

To this day, we've still never seen dry land, and I'm still not convinced it even exists. As I watch the criss-crossing ships heading off in all directions, burning fuel and oarsman-hours, I get the feeling they are wasting their time and missing the beauty of what's right there under our boat. The circulating current seems stronger than the fastest ship, so paddling in any direction at all in search of land seems fruitless to me. If the wind or the currents take us to dry land, we'll make the best of it when that day comes, and I guess that's when we'll find out what lies beyond. Given that every sign intercepted by the Ship turned out to be an illusion, though, I'm through with the futility of the chase for now.

We enjoy our occasional encounters with other drifters, but so far we haven't rafted up with anyone else. Every once in a while, a large ship will pass by us; we've run across yachts, frigates, warships, and pirate ships.

The first one we encountered was a cruise ship with a steam engine. It seemed very modern compared to ours since it didn't need any manual labor for its propulsion system. It sounded tempting to be able to relax without having to row ourselves.

"If you like our company," the officer on deck said, "you'll need to burn your little ship and get on board, because we need more fuel for the furnace."

"Thanks, I said, "We'll pass."

"Suit yourself," they said, "but your little boat will never hold water, and you'll all drown out here by yourselves."

We decided to take our chances. Next came a party boat, with music blaring and passengers keeled over the side. We had to dodge some nasty jetsam from our flotsam, and we passed on their invitations to climb aboard as well.

One day a Galleon passed by with a web of ropes behind it. The ropes were tied to hooks and harpoons that had been launched at passing vessels; we had to dodge a few ourselves. They

were dragging along all sorts of debris which had trapped a whole lot of sailors, most of whom didn't seem to have any interest in getting on board at all. Some of the transients didn't even realize they were tethered to the mother ship, and some were just being pulled along by the force of the powerful wake. One of the crew members leaned over the side to see if we had been harpooned as well.

"Sit down, you're rockin' the boat!" came a loud voice through a bullhorn megaphone.

My heart sank a bit at the thought of someone telling a sailor where he was allowed to look. I wanted no part in that sort of obstinance, and we had to paddle away hard to avoid being snagged.

The latest ship to pass by us was an inmate ship; it felt awful to see galley slaves shackled to their oars. The exploitation seemed appalling, but I realized that the detainees were doing some of the same tasks under duress that we had done voluntarily on the Ship. Again, we fled the scene as fast as we could. I came away from this encounter with the distinct impression that we had been just as shackled as the prisoners; but rather than iron chains, our coercive fetters had come in the form of fake stories that had conscripted our minds for a made-up cause.

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#### *The Note*

From where I float today, I acknowledge that the voices from the passing ships may be right, or they may be wrong. So far, none of the other ships look to be worth boarding, but what do I know about the future, anyway? For now, I'm just bobbing in the waves, happily floating in my makeshift rowboat. I don't have any regrets from here; sure, I wish I had recognized the manipulation earlier in my naval career, and I do have a few questions I wish I had asked the Captain myself while I was on board, but all in all I can't complain about my circumstances or the journey that landed me here. I like our little boat, and if life on the Ship is what it took to get me to appreciate this new life, well then so be it. Without having had that experience, I might be tempted to climb on board one of the other passing ships where I would get caught up in another regimented routine that leaves no time to enjoy the surf. No thanks!

My compass and keyring have become mementos of a former life without any other function. I was told the salt water would corrode them and render them useless the moment I jumped anyway, so even if the Sellas Pier's gate was a thing after all, my key is now a dud just like my compass always was. So I don't know why I kept them at all, but at times I look at the trinkets and miss life on the ship. I really do. When I think of the young recruits singing songs of Sellas, for example, I remember the melodies fondly. But when I think of some of the accompanying lyrics, I have to lean over the side and throw up a little, and I quickly remember why I jumped ship.

In my own boat, I get wet when it rains. When the wind blows, I bob up and down with the waves. On board the Ship, it was dry and warm, and you could feel safe and stable...as long as you read only the official flyers, stayed off the ropes, steered clear of the library, and kept your hands on the oars. Despite the occasional disorientation and discomfort in my daily life today, the trade-off is that I can navigate my own craft without having to lip sync phrases that I can't bring myself to say out loud. And I wouldn't trade that prerogative for anything!

It's fun to draw maps about where we might be heading, but I realize now that there are no fixed reference points that might serve as a basis for any map at all. I've tried to learn as much as I can from other drifters who have shown me their maps; I see it all as conjecture, but I do find that their maps help me to get to know them better. Some have said there is nothing but water, while

others say the only thing encircling the sea is a shear drop off to oblivion where everything that passes over the edge collapses into an endless, meaningless, purposeless, senseless void. According to that view, the end result will be the same for all of us, so you might as well just lie down in your vessel and wait to meet your inevitable fate. Some have said the entire sea is one tiny drop of water in a landscape of massive scale that we'll finally see someday when we master the magic of flight. Others say the landscape is authentic, but we'll never see it ourselves, so all of the paddling around is for nothing despite its reality.

Maybe the elusive dry land was just a myth all along, made up by those captains who needed oarsmen to plow through the waters and collect the spoils of naval warfare. As flawed as all of the maps seem to be, though, none of them are as absurd to me as an endless sea – much as it fits our observations. I am convinced there is something else, but I'm likewise convinced that Smitty, Comoros, and the Lookout haven't got a clue as to what that something else might be.

As I was looking out at the sea from my little boat the other day, reflecting on what might lie past the horizon, I saw a bottle floating past with a message inside. I scooped it up and pulled out the scroll.



I was surprised to find a flyer that appeared to have come straight from the Ship's printing press, signed by Captain Comoros himself. I couldn't believe my good fortune of having picked up a message from my own former Ship.

"How are you enjoying your time aboard the Ship?" it read. The question seemed odd, since nobody had ever asked me for my opinion while I was at the oars, but apparently the Captain was conducting an opinion survey, and someone had thrown their survey form overboard. It was obviously intended for active-duty crewmembers on board the Ship, but maybe they wouldn't mind hearing my impressions as well.

The form included some blank check boxes ranging from good to excellent. There was no box to check for a bad review, but it did include a comment field, so that's where I started my list. After adding my comments, I rolled it up again and tossed it back in the ocean. Maybe someday it will float past the Ship to be scooped up. Maybe some of the suggestions could save someone else the hassle of having to jump out themselves.

Maybe some things have already changed in the meantime. Maybe by the time anyone reads my suggestions, Captain Comoros will already be letting people out for a swim to enjoy the water and have a look at what's beneath the waves while still allowing them to get back in and travel with the entourage. Maybe everyone will have been told the truth about the trumpet-wielding figurehead, the acrophobic Lookout, or the redacted maps. Maybe the Captain will have apologized for casting the castaways overboard. Maybe after a mutiny, the Ship will have broken up into a flotilla of vessels piloted by mariners that still choose to travel together without compulsion. Maybe by then, all of the passengers and crew will feel free to express their individual views on the trajectory ahead. Maybe instead of damning the Farragut torpedo mines at full speed, knocking crewmembers overboard with each explosion along the unwavering path, the Captain will have learned to watch out for his counterparts and proceed more cautiously. That's really all I can hope for in the end.

As I write about my journey, my changing pronunciation and enunciation sums up my changing perspective: In my head, my former home has transformed from *THE Ship*, to *the Ship*, to *the ship*, and finally to *a ship*. We're all in the same sea together, no captain having any more or less a clue than any other about what lies past the horizon.

I see an occasional seabird flying off to the horizon, and I like to imagine where it might be heading to roost. I think we all have an equal right to picture what's out there without anyone conspiring to paint that picture for us. In the meantime, all I can offer is the suggestions that come from my own voyage.

"Come give it a try!" is the last thing I wrote in the comment box, "the water's just fine out here!"

This is my message in a bottle!



## My Reality: The Old Ship Zion

*"Please take a moment to rate our service"*

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Some of this symbolism associated with the “Old Ship Zion” may be apparent to Mormons; the Ship is, of course, *the* Church, capitalized as if it’s the only church, which is, of course, on record as being “the only true and living church, with which I the Lord am well pleased,” which is, of course, a big claim – even bigger if you ignore the comma!

I’ll leave the analogies for the individual items on board up to individual interpretation, but as for the ship itself, in a 2014 general conference address, M. Russell Ballard quoted a dialogue that Brigham Young had imagined taking place on the deck of a ship that was in the midst of a storm:

“I am not going to stay here,” says one, “I don’t believe this is the *Ship Zion*.”

“But we are in the midst of the ocean.”

“I don’t care, I am not going to stay here.”

“Off goes the coat, and he jumps overboard.”

So presumably, this is me. Yep, I’m jumping overboard. So what does Brother Brigham have to say about me and others who jump or take a pleasure cruise in the whaling boats, as he described those who temporarily stray?

“Will he not be drowned? Yes. So with those who leave this Church. It is the ‘Old Ship Zion,’ let us stay in it...Let us stick to the old ship...you need not be concerned.”

Elder Ballard then offers the following advice in connection with this analogy:

“Brothers and sisters, stay in the boat, use your life jackets, and hold on with both hands. Avoid distractions! And if any one of you have fallen out of the boat, we will seek you, find you, minister to you, and pull you safely back onto the Old Ship Zion, where God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ are at the helm and will guide us right, to which I humbly testify in the name of Jesus Christ.”

Many of my family member and my friends adhere to these words, not just in terms of the allegory of the ship, but to the last six words in particular. They believe that these words that were stated by a mortal man were actually spoken “in the name of Jesus Christ.” In other words, the Ship leads to safety; it cannot go off course, because Jesus himself is guiding the Captain. The words are divine; they are canonized scripture, spoken as if by deity. My trite little exclamation about how the water is fine cannot possibly hold true. And if the ship felt oppressive, that’s my own fault because it simply is not so. And now it’s just a matter of time until the sharks bite off my leg, then circle around me to devour me whole if it’s too late to pull me back into safety. I am the problem, not the ship or the routine or the redacted Captain’s log. If I had concerns, I didn’t need to speak up; I should have just listened to Brother Brigham and his successors for the answer: “You need not be concerned.”

As much as I am convinced that the Ship itself is heading for the shoals, I am also convinced that the Lookout will spot the danger at the last minute, and the Captain will change course out of pure self-preservation. I suspect that the trajectory of the undeviating, hard-line, stick-to-your-guns course they have charted straight into a cliff using fake maps will eventually be redrawn to make it look like it’s been pointing to safety all along. And nobody on the Ship will know the difference, because the truth of the old line will be deemed “not very useful.”

My message in a bottle will probably never arrive, but even if it were received, my advice to avoid the shoals would likely not be taken into account. And even if it the advice were to be followed, it wouldn’t get acknowledged. Likewise, those who were thrown off the Ship for offering similar advice – and not keeping their mouths shut about it as instructed – will not be mentioned in the Captain’s log. Even so, it was therapeutic for me to submit my feedback and throw it into the ethereal ocean, so at least I have that!

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#### *Survey in a bottle*

When I attend an industry event, I expect to have a chance to provide feedback. When I host an event myself, distributing a questionnaire is one of the most crucial items on my agenda. Without the feedback, it’s hard to improve my service offerings. Why should church be any different, given the huge investment of time by both the participants and the organizers?



## Sunday Services Evaluation and Feedback



Thank you for worshipping with us today. We would like to know if you enjoyed the services and would appreciate your responses to the following questions so that we can improve the experience for attendees in the future:

| Please place a check mark next to the appropriate rating             |                     |                      |            |                |                    |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|----------------------|------------|----------------|--------------------|
| Today's church service                                               | Fell well short of  | Fell just short of   | Met        | Exceeded       | Greatly exceeded   |
| my overall goals for attending                                       |                     |                      |            |                |                    |
| The talks were                                                       | Not relevant        | Somewhat relevant    | Relevant   | Very relevant  | Extremely relevant |
| to my daily life                                                     |                     |                      |            |                |                    |
| I found the lesson manual                                            | Extremely difficult | Difficult            | Adequate   | Easy           | Very easy          |
| to follow                                                            |                     |                      |            |                |                    |
| I found the chapel                                                   | Extremely difficult | Difficult            | Adequate   | Easy           | Very easy          |
| to travel to                                                         |                     |                      |            |                |                    |
| Speaker rating                                                       | Poor                | Below Average        | Average    | Above Average  | Excellent          |
| Youth Speaker                                                        |                     |                      |            |                |                    |
| Adult Speaker                                                        |                     |                      |            |                |                    |
| High Councilor                                                       |                     |                      |            |                |                    |
| Sunday School Teacher                                                |                     |                      |            |                |                    |
| Facility rating                                                      | Poor                | Below Average        | Average    | Above Average  | Excellent          |
| Pew comfort                                                          |                     |                      |            |                |                    |
| Audio/visual                                                         |                     |                      |            |                |                    |
| Classrooms                                                           |                     |                      |            |                |                    |
| Meeting block length                                                 | Prefer 1 hour       | Prefer 2 hours       | Just right | Prefer 4 hours | Prefer 5 hours     |
|                                                                      |                     |                      |            |                |                    |
| Home teaching frequency                                              | Prefer annually     | Prefer semi-annually | Just right | Prefer weekly  | Prefer daily       |
|                                                                      |                     |                      |            |                |                    |
| Please provide your comments regarding any improvements we can make: |                     |                      |            |                |                    |
|                                                                      |                     |                      |            |                |                    |

Year after year, Mormons have publicly told each other in Sunday school class and in testimony meetings about their wonderful temple experiences. Many church members privately confess to their leaders, however, that parts of the temple ceremonies make them horribly uncomfortable. In response to growing complaints, in the late 1980s LDS Church leaders composed an opinion survey to find out more about what temple-goers enjoyed – and what made them cringe.

In response to the survey, substantial changes were made to the temple ceremonies. Many of the changes were aimed at reducing the focus on vengeance and penalties – and increasing concentration on the genuinely positive parts of the respondents' experiences. I was lucky enough to have come on board right after the most substantial changes were made, but I do wonder how the violent nature of the previous oaths would have made me feel; would I still have spoken positively about the experience like the crowds admiring the Emperor's beautiful clothes? Given my current hindsight, I hope I would have objected to at least the most disturbing of the recitations and symbolic actions, but in reality, I have to admit that I probably would have gone right along with it,

trusting that those who brought me to the “House of the Lord” were telling the truth about their own convictions – and laying the blame for any knots in my stomach on God’s mysterious ways.

I was about ten years old when my sweet old grandmother came to visit us in Germany. My parents took her to the Swiss Temple, and I remember waiting outside, wondering what was going on inside. When I now picture my sweet old grandmother vowing to slit the throats of apostates like me, I’m surprised they needed a PR firm to tell them she’s not the throat-slitting type. I could have saved them a few stamps and a decade or two of heebie jeebies instilled in the newcomers who would later express their concern on their survey cards.

Growing up in the LDS Church, I never got the impression that the church existed to meet my needs; I understood that its programs and policies were going to be implemented regardless of my changing needs. If my own needs weren’t being met, it was not a problem with the provider but rather with my unwarranted expectations. The church is structured with a top-down, military-style hierarchy, with the commander-in-chief – and the system he leads – presumed to represent an unchanging, unwavering, eternal truth. If a change is needed, church members are taught that God will tell the prophet to make the change; it’s not your job to change it from the bottom ranks, after all! And your needs *need* to comply with whatever protocol is disseminated from headquarters. Dissent is allowed, but only within a single level of command; and truthfully, that dissent rarely rises any higher through official channels.

There seems to be an impression among the LDS membership that the programs that are ultimately implemented by the church constitute God’s will being disseminated *down* the chain; requests sent *up* the chain by rank-and-file members are sometimes construed as acts of sedition, even if they are later incorporated into the ever-changing handbooks. Cases in which an opinion is officially solicited, followed by subsequent changes made in response to the commoner’s experience – as in the 1990 temple ceremony updates – seem to be very rare occurrences that are never even officially acknowledged. The lack of publicity around these matters is perhaps understandable; otherwise members might start asking why apostles who have direct access to God Himself would need to rely on an opinion survey at all!

Do LDS Church members have any right to demand an ultimatum? Only those who come to realize that Church leaders have absolutely no control over their souls would take that step without any fear of putting their church membership or tithing funds on the line as collateral or as a bail bond. But while you believe that the bishop who has to interview you every other year will be an eternal judge in Israel, dissidence is going to be very subdued at best.

Maybe that attitude has been changing over time and I just never got the memo, but in over forty years of active church membership, nobody ever asked me what I thought should be done to improve my own experience in the church. As far as what could be done to get better church attendance, temple attendance, home teaching results, or the like? Yes, I certainly got those memos. But in terms of my own experience? Nobody ever asked, and funny enough, I never even thought that was weird.

In my business, I rely heavily on customer feedback to ensure I am meeting my clients’ needs. Well, I think it’s high time for a new survey of LDS church members – this one covering the entire LDS experience rather than just one aspect of it. Why not give it another try? Maybe there’s already something like this in the works, but in the meantime, I’m just going to make up my own survey, pretending that I just opened my mailbox to find a self-addressed, postage-paid, fill-in-the-blank form from the church asking for feedback about my Mormon experience.

I don't like the idea of throwing out a bunch of criticism without recommended solutions. So from the home box office in Grand Rapids Michigan, here is my top-ten-Letterman-list of recommended changes that might have helped convince me to keep raising my family in the LDS Church:

10. Give prospective missionaries the option of serving service missions.
9. Add a preparation room to the temple.
8. Remove waiting periods between temple marriages and civil marriages, and allow children to watch sealing ceremonies.
7. Reword or remove the temple recommend interview question about affiliation with those with differing beliefs.
6. Allow meta-mormons to hold temple recommends and acknowledge non-literal interpretations as valid.
5. Rename Brigham Young University.
4. Remove the facsimiles.
3. Rewrite the gospel topics essays to take some responsibility for previous mistakes, removing God's hand from the origin story of racist, sexist, or homophobic policies.
2. Ordain women.
1. Rescind the November policy and disavow the notions behind it.

That's it! I'm narrowing the outcome of a 40-year journey to just ten simple steps, most of which could be accomplished with a few simple keystrokes and the click of a mouse. I could list a hundred more, but I think these would make a great start! [2020 footnote: #1, #7, and #8 have been implemented since this was first written in 2017, at least in part. Now how about taking it a bit further, for example with #8, adopting the reverse where the sealing comes at least a year later?]

So what do you think would happen if I were to mail in my reply card with these suggestions? Would any of them be taken seriously? My guess is that those sorting out the results would toss my card straight into the tiny pile of irrelevant, dissident voices. My card would be seen as an outlier, unrepresentative of a majority opinion, because most church members would simply reply with a check mark in the "keep up the good work" box. The conservative, affirmative consensus would then convince those at the helm to continue conducting business as usual – perhaps allowing for a trickle of peripheral updates that can be attributed to continuing revelation.

While three-hour church was in place, for example, many people testified that there was no place they'd rather be on a Sunday morning than in the three-hour block. Everyone now seems to love the change to two-hour church, but can you imagine if there had been a petition on change.org calling for a reduction of meeting time rather than just gradually allowing the leaders to interpret the silent murmurs reaching their desk? Mormons just don't tend to be in the habit of suggesting changes through any sort of official channels.

That is, unless the tide has changed in the meantime?

In the past, we have seen that changes on this scale don't come about as a result of opinions alone. The only tangible results have been brought about by the threat of reduced membership

numbers, dwindling tithing funds, discrimination lawsuits, or even full-scale military invasion as the case may be.

What if a substantial number of Mormons adopted the “18 is the new 8” position, for instance? Would a statistically relevant decrease in baptisms of members of record draw some attention? What if famous Mormons and BYU alums refused to use Brigham Young’s name on their profiles? Or if a growing number of tithing settlements landed a tick in the “Non” or “Partial” box, subject to any number of grass-roots conditions? What would it take to actually see some of these changes through?

Mormons are raised to believe that change in the church cannot be brought about from the key-less masses. But history has shown that many of the positive changes over the years have come about that way, albeit well after those who first suggested the changes have been excommunicated from the fold.

So back to the suggestions, here are some additional notes for each item on the top ten list:

*10. Service Missions.* This option would be for those who have doubts about LDS truth claims but wish to serve honorably and avoid the stigma of declining to serve (or being sent home early for not being able to cope with their doubts). Missionary applications could include a tick box: service mission or proselyting mission. To be effective, there would need to be no other repercussions in terms of later callings or reputation in the Church. It could be a no-questions-asked preference without pressure to choose one or the other. The service option might apply to a prospective missionary who is would be comfortable preaching the gospel as a means of acquiring a testimony as has been suggested previously in missionary manuals. Although this suggestion would apply to both boys and girls equally, for generations, LDS girls in particular have been raised not to “settle” for anything less than a returned missionary when looking for a partner. Just as it is a badge of honor for a parent to call their son an “RM” in Mormon culture, it is likewise a badge of honor to say your daughter married an RM. So what does that say about the opposite? This option might be for a boy who does not want to be a hypocrite but doesn’t want to instantly annihilate their BYU dating pool either. I was sent to “rescue” some of these “lost souls” as a missionary myself, and the threat of the stigma they would carry for life was a very effective tool in convincing them to stick it out. I feel horrible about that now; the stigma shouldn’t exist at all, but I’ve included this option because it is an unfortunate reality.

*9. Temple Preparation Room.* Before people sign billion-year contracts, making eternal oaths while Satan himself stares them down with threats of breaking covenants that they haven’t even had time to think through, give them the transcript so they can weigh out their options. If this needs to stay in the temple, perhaps a library or study room could be added to each temple as a special preparation room. Without this, we put teenagers on the spot, surrounding them with those who are most special to them, reminding them that it’s not just the mortal onlookers, but all of their ancestors who preceded them watching this moment. You have exactly three seconds to agree to the terms; well, what’s it going to be, yes, or no? Well, honestly, I don’t even understand the question. And honestly, we all should have said, “No, let me think about it” in that moment. But 99% of us who found ourselves in that situation said, “Yes! Come what may, I trust you, and I trust those who went before me, and I trust all of my faithful ancestors in a straight line back to Adam himself.” I believe we should be asking those considering these steps to think about it and pray about it ahead of time. If the wording can’t be included in a temple preparation class under the current curriculum, then let’s make a special room inside the temple, giving endowment candidates as long as they need without any pressure before deciding for themselves to take the next step.

8. *Waiting period.* A 1-year waiting period for temple marriages after civil marriage seems to be the norm in some countries, so why not do it everywhere? The civil celebration can be a valid occasion for everyone who attends rather than tainting the day for so many like the current practices do. The temple sealing can remain just as special and meaningful to those endowed individuals who return with the couple a year on. Under current cultural scrutiny, couples who are not sealed may be seen to be living in sin, putting a stigma on that first year; again, it shouldn't be that way, but it is. So putting everyone in an equalizing situation of holding a civil union first would be a sacrifice for those rare couples where everyone who wishes to celebrate their wedding is temple endowed. LDS children grow up singing about sealings that they will never witness until they're adults. For many Mormon kids, the first marriage they'll ever attend will be their own. It's absurd to expect kids to look forward to something they've never witnessed. Let them in so they can see it and grow up knowing what to expect – and allow them to decide whether that's what they want for themselves.

7. *Questionable affiliation.* One highly misunderstood temple recommend question asks whether the candidate affiliates with anyone whose practices are contrary to those accepted by the Church. Because all of the other questions are simple yes or no questions with obvious answer, many feel the need to answer this one with a resolute *No*. The problem is that the only way to actually implement that answer into your own life would be to entirely cast every non-orthodox Mormon out of your life regardless of their status as an active-, inactive-, non-, ex-, anti-, or any other sort of Mormon, because everyone engages in contrary practices of one sort or another. For twenty years I answered this questions with a yes, then added a disclaimer about the line I would draw between affiliation and support. And every time we just moved on to the next question. The belief that you have to answer this question with a *no* causes some to engage in unwarranted shunning or disassociation with loved ones. This question should be reworded to discourage that practice.

6. *Non-literal acceptance.* Repeated messages from the top effectively screen out those who cannot accept the literal truth of the Book of Mormon. It would take an alternative directive from the top to allow those meta-mormons to maintain any validity while still being able to truthfully answer temple recommend questions. How many Sunday School class attendees believe in a literal global flood, a literal Adam's Apple, or a literal hungry whale? The percentage has been gradually declining over the years, and a church member's opinion on the matter doesn't seem to affect their standing in the church. Take the same interpretation of the Rameumptom, Jaredite barges, or a thousand other tidbits in the Book of Mormon, however, and you'll get yourself labelled as an apostate who would be shown the door if this belief was uttered in Sunday School. A meta-Christian father can attend his daughter's temple sealing while publicly holding an opinion that Jonah is a fictional character but has to wait outside if he believes the same about Moroni. Can't we create a legitimate place for meta-Mormons?

5. *Rename Brigham Young University.* Given Brigham Young's racist rhetoric, if you wouldn't be comfortable wearing a Brigham Young sweatshirt in the company of a black friend, why wear it at all? Renaming BYU would be expensive, but if President Nelson can have a dream and rebrand the entire Church, why not a school? And if it ends up being too expensive, it's absolutely free for alumni to change the name themselves on their own profile. Let's go, Timp U!

4. *Remove the facsimiles.* The captions on the facsimiles are admittedly false, so binding them together with the "most correct" book on earth seems counterintuitive and counterproductive.

3. *Alternative essays.* None of the gospel topics essays follow the Church's own advice on the necessary steps for repentance. To comply with those steps, the essays would need to be rewritten to actually take some responsibility for previous mistakes, removing God's hand from the origin

story of racist, sexist, or homophobic policies. I've included alternative essays above as a regurgitation of what I was taught in primary about how to repent.

2. *Ordain women*. Someday Church members will go back through the history of excluding women from priesthood offices and will see that there is even less doctrinal or scriptural justification for that practice than there ever was for racial discrimination (which actually required some previously accepted scriptures to be rescinded and reworded). And someday the argument will be made that this was simply a policy and not doctrine. Even if we go so far as to assume that God has reserved priesthood authority and its accompanying discernment for men – for which I see absolutely no justification whatsoever other than arrogantly chauvinistic habits and old patriarchal traditions – why on earth would a congregation want to limit its selection pool for badly needed leadership roles to half of the potential candidates? The notion that men have some pre-disposed, fore-ordained organizational aptitude that grants them a greater ability to head up an organization is stunningly ignorant, if that has been a factor in implementing and upholding any of these policies. Whatever the reason, gender roles are baseless for many of the assignments that are currently limited to those with a Y chromosome. To truly comply with being equally yoked, maybe a ward should be run by a couple rather than a bishop where each partner takes on responsibilities according to their individual talents; in my experience, many of those responsibilities would be better served by someone lacking the Y chromosome!

1. *Rescind the November Policy*. It just seems absurd that anyone would take upon themselves the right to instruct someone about their own attraction. “Let me tell you who you should be attracted to...regardless of whom you're actually attracted to.” One way in which I feel a bit of affinity for that situation is that the message I received was, “Let me tell you what you should believe...regardless of what you can actually bring yourself to believe.” There are certain, inherent traits that institutional guilt trips are not going to be able to overcome. For those who can't get over the biblical verses on the subject, fine, go to your grave with your unchangeable viewpoint, but in the meantime, can't you just treat everyone like they're celibate? Cause it's none of your freaking business anyway!

[2020 footnote: We've been waiting over 40 years since the priesthood ban was lifted, and we still haven't heard the words, “it was wrong,” so maybe I shouldn't hold my breath, but now that the November Policy has been rescinded, the next step is to honestly disavow the notions behind it!]

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So that's my top ten list, but who am I to make any suggestions now? I know full well that an expatriate has no voting rights. Even though I first wrote these up as an insider, the instant I hit “publish” I will become an outsider, bearing no relevance for influencing internal policy. Any credibility I may have had in Mormon circles will disappear, and my dissent will be labelled as apostate or anti-Mormon with whatever accompanying implications that bears. I never saw it that way myself; in fact, I wanted to offer some of these suggestions as an insider, but I never managed to find an avenue to do so while adhering to the program.

Not one of these suggestions calls for people to leave, unless appeals put forward under that condition are left unaddressed. These suggestions are intended to change the environment rather than to destroy it. A community of millions is a powerful force; even if it were possible to disband the whole thing in one fell swoop, I wouldn't push that button. I would hope that internal changes allow others who find themselves in my position to stay. As for myself, by the time I pulled the plug, there was nothing left in it for me, but it doesn't have to be that way for others. When something isn't working, I prefer to fix it rather than throw it away. When you look at the parts of the EU

agreements that weren't working for the UK, for example, there were plenty of other parts that were still fixable. So fix those elements that aren't working! Make adjustments where needed. But to throw out decades of efforts, including all of the things that were working effectively, is an utter waste in my book. Maybe those who were getting the raw end of the deal tried to make changes and were silenced by a system that wouldn't respond. That's where I find myself with my own grievances related to the LDS Church. In that case, fine, walk away as a last resort. But I'm left with the question: Couldn't the problematic issues just be fixed to avoid LDXit?

So given my expat status, I'm not sure why I even bothered to include these suggestions here, and I'm not sure any active Mormons would be comfortable reading this far into a critical monologue anyway. But just in case there are any believing Mormons who might still be with me, what would your own list look like? And who would you ever tell?

If you followed the protocol and told your bishop your suggestions, you'd have an audience of one. And you'd get a handshake after the interview, followed by few additional rescue visits to make sure you're keeping sweet. And you'd still have an audience of one, because your recommendations aren't likely to be passed up the chain to his presiding officer. If you wanted the idea to gain traction and decided to push for change on social media, that might be effective, but you'd be bypassing the proper procedures. Would you be willing to have people question your resolve to follow the prophet by circumventing his approved procedure for expressing your ideas? Careful, that's bordering on evil speaking! Why would I assume that's what people would say behind your back? Because I've sat in dozens of rescue meetings during my Mormon career, and I've said it myself a hundred times when I'd see people expressing any form of dissent: "So and so is going off the deep end!" Rest assured, that is being said about me now. Well, I guess I can't complain about that accusation because it's true: I actually am off in the deep end, and as it turns out, I prefer the open sea to being anchored in the supposed safety of the shallows where you'll never really learn to swim.

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### *Reconstruction time again*

Now that I'm swimming in the deep, feeling free to believe whatever I choose to believe, what should I pick? Could I believe in reincarnation? Zen? Yin and Yang? Or nothing at all? How do I rebuild a faith in anything when every thread seems to be tied to the toppling dominoes that have already fallen? And would I even want to rebuild a faith at all?

As I reflect on my own journey, the deconstruction of my former beliefs, and the reconstruction of whatever will replace them, I have to acknowledge the influence of some academic twists and political peeves that fed into my decision to jump ship – and that form some of my requirements for whatever philosophy I choose to adopt going forward. I realize that not everyone is wired this way, but I would expect any metaphysical philosophy to be in harmony with the logical, real world in terms of the physical planet, its people, its politics, its history, and the underlying, observable scientific laws that govern the universe.

So if you'll allow me to geek out for a bit, let's start with the idea of a creator. I was implanted with a Mormon view of an infinite patriarchal succession and eternal matter. I don't know what that means from where I stand now, but I still imagine there must be some force behind everything we can observe – some entity that supercedes time, space, and matter – but I'm also convinced that no human mind that resides within the present sphere would have any capacity whatsoever to even begin imagining what might be outside the structure. There are plenty of



fascinating, real answers available within the structure of the universe; what lies beyond might make for interesting discussion material, but in my eyes, questions that cannot be answered during our lifetimes shouldn't preoccupy our precious finite mortal years. So why bother?

I can accept the idea of a creative force, but whether or not we bear any relevance to that entity, I have no idea. I have wished for it with all my heart while my son lay on an operating table without a heartbeat of his own, so if hope is faith, I guess I could call it that. I have observed enough absolutely improbable miracles in my life to accept the possibility of some sort of rigging, but as far as whether there is direct interaction – whether that creator contacts mortals and vice versa – who knows? Maybe that's a thing, maybe it isn't. I'm now agnostic in that regard, and to me that question will remain unknowable until my own death.

If it is in fact a thing, though, I'm convinced that a supreme being would prioritize things a bit differently than I've been taught thus far in my life. If you're going to dream a dream in which the creator of our world makes a personal appearance, for example, even if we don't get the keys to the Grand Unified Theory that would unlock the mysteries of the universe, I would at least hope we would get something useful and positive out of that interaction. Tell us where the Nigerian schoolgirls are, for instance, or give us some intel on Kony's whereabouts; when I'm told that the divine interaction through a sole mortal mouthpiece among billions has culminated in a discriminatory policy or a logo change, I come to doubt the direct order.

So if there is such a thing as divinity, and if I could tune into a divine source of inspiration for myself, what do I believe God would really say to me? If I could get back a survey form with some feedback on my own performance thus far, what advice would I get? Would I get an attaboy pat-on-the-back with the encouragement to continue along the way I'm charting for myself? Or would I get chastised to tears for allowing this path of discovery to pull my family off track from the trajectory toward the grand reunion that I'll be missing in Celestialville?

If the advice were to be customized to my own life, right here, right now, what sort of crucial information would I get? My guess is he or she would start by saying, "Go lose about 20 pounds, your kids need you around!" I expect that advice would be more helpful than feeling inspired to read about another Book of Mormon battle or whatever other message I used believe my spiritual divining rod was sending to my soul. In any case, I don't think I would be advised to spend the second half of my life whining about how something that turned out to be made up robbed me of the first half of my life; but rather, I would expect to be challenged to simply make the most of what's left in Act 2 and to help make life a positive experience for anyone I run across along the way.

So in order to guide my remaining years, I'd like to identify those values I would want to promote. I may draw philosophies from other world religions, or perhaps from science itself. I remember looking at the Ensign magazine on my kitchen table next to a National Geographic magazine a few years ago. The epiphany probably didn't strike me as hard as it should have, but looking at the titles of the articles inside, I realized I have much more in common with members of the National Geographic Society than I do with members of the LDS Church. A community of like-minded people can provide some much-needed support to each other; but based on the recent polarization of politics along religious lines, I also find the lack of alternative views to be dangerous in a setting that relies on common beliefs. I realized when I was flipping through the pages of the Ensign that I don't belong in a Mormon chapel at all, because the National Geographic articles actually spoke more to my soul than the First Presidency message. Which one has better advice for how I should spend the precious few remaining days I have left on this planet?



*Contrasting views of the world*

Looking back on it, my decision should really have been very simple at that point, and I could have saved myself 300 pages of rambling and a couple of years' worth of PEC meetings!

Don't get me wrong: I understand those who believe there is an all-out war for the salvation of eternal souls that requires an understanding of the Battle of Zeniff if humanity is to emerge victorious; if that is the case, then sure, let's focus on the reading list in the Ensign and call the planet itself collateral damage. But I'm in a position now where I believe that Zeezrom and Zarahemla are as made up as Zeph himself and that the real war is humanitarian in nature and ought to be fought against despots and tyrants and abusers rather than unseen forces of darkness that can be dispelled by opening a book that highlights the superiority and divinity of white skin.

So on that note, one of the main motivating forces that drives my professional work is the protection of the planet and its communities. I realize it's not always possible to meet that goal in the face of development, but I try my best to preserve as much of the natural habitat as possible, and I see extinction of individual species as an utter tragedy that is often preventable. The environment obviously can't always be the priority when human lives are at stake, but its destruction will ultimately destroy its communities as well, and it's something that in my eyes should be seen as at least one of the priorities worth striving for. So again, if divine direction is a thing, wouldn't you expect the protection of the planet to at least be on the agenda?

The *Lord's University* first started offering degrees in civil and *environmental* engineering during my college days. In my eyes at the time, that change was authorized by the only board of trustees in the universe that bore apostolic authority. Yet in my decades as a practicing environmental engineer, armed with that degree, I sat through dozens of general conferences knowing that one of the topics I was most passionate about, that I thought mattered to God, and on which I thought we could use some divine direction, would be ignored again and again. Yes, I could extract about 30 seconds' worth of sound-bite quotes around environmental stewardship, but out of thousands of hours of air-time, that essentially reflects silence on the topic.

Through the years as there have been environmental catastrophes and mass extinctions that were absolutely preventable with a bit of communal resolve, a community that was centered around Christ the Creator was offered no guidance or leadership whatsoever on the topic. Maybe we're expected to just act individually, but if someone is going to tell me that divine intervention is a thing,

I have to believe the ongoing destruction of the planet would at last be raised as a topic. Unfortunately, though, the clusterstorm of U.S. politics has managed to group environmentalism with abortion, and the America-focused quorum of church leaders can't seem to bring themselves to promote the planet for fear of strengthening the opposing party.

If God gave us back a scorecard on how well we've done taking care of his planet and its inhabitants, how would we rate? Environmental pillaging and some of the other most crucial threats we face as a human race demand an international, global solution. The paranoid fight against global entities that could help make a positive impact has historically been supported by LDS church leaders who somehow imagined up a sinister plot to unravel God's own constitution by Gadianton's international men of mystery. Once again, I'm calling the direct orders into question here, because even if those systems have flaws, isn't fixing the system better than withdrawing entirely to let bickering national interests have the final say, with the one carrying the biggest stick emerging the victor and leaving nothing but ashes in its wake? Deference to a higher authority is needed when you're dealing with international waters or imaginary borders that undermine the environment; instead, the words from the pulpit have an air of nationalism that favors what is seen as a divinely ordained political system that simply isn't equipped to do the job on its own. I guess all I can do from where I stand is to try to adopt preservation and protection of the vulnerable elements of the planet and its people into my own philosophy. But if a survey form came floating along, one of my suggested changes would be to incorporate stewardship of the Earth into Church teachings. I think that matters.

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Prioritization

Mormon doctrine says we went a millennium and a half without an official word from Jesus. So when he did finally speak up, I would think it would have to be something significant, perhaps some advice on structuring systems that could help avoid the ensuing, global calamities instead of the recommended subordination to nationalistic interests that comes across in latter-day revelations, which has historically provided more cannon fodder for each powder keg along the way.

The number of alleged, first-person quotes uttered by the Jesus is very limited, and very few religions even claim to possess any at all. Mormons have a few hundred pages that haven't increased in length in over a century, so even though it's longer than the claims of most other religions, it is still a finite record. If the creator and savior of the earth and every last one of its billions of inhabitants were to utter a few pages worth of phrases in English to be printed and distributed to the world, what sort of mysteries would he unfold for us in that preciously limited volume? I have a hard time believing that conflicting instructions that "my servant Frederick G. Williams should not sell his farm" and that "my servant Isaac Morley should sell his farm" would make it into this special-edition book, accompanied by prophetic recommendations that devout followers should spend their time reading those instructions over and over again for their own edification. Again, I'm thinking the priorities are a little off when I see on the other hand how far a little effort on the humanitarian front can go.

I also can't imagine myself up a God that would prioritize his or her agenda to be preoccupied with hiding evidence of the existence of millions of fellow humans as a test for billions of others. Whether that's Sinai or Zarahemla, I just don't buy it. In my geomorphological work, I can see how even very shallow water moves dirt and leaves a record; anything even remotely close to a global flood would have left a substantial imprint to say the least. The lack of that imprint leaves

either the lack of the event's occurrence or a divine coverup (of biblical proportions if I may!) as the only two alternatives. Pressuring people to adopt literal, historical interpretations of mythological legends that require this sort of divinely arbitrary intervention to digest is simply not my cup of decaf.

As I read the script that's been handed to me, one of the final straws that prevents my finite mind from accepting it as literal truth is the absurdity of fore-knowledge. The miracle that Joseph of Old saw Joseph of New along with Columbus and other souls centuries in advance would require an absolute knowledge of absolutely everything. A being would need to have run every quark within every atom from the beginning of time through to its conclusion in order to predict a single, future birth. Any deviation of a single nanosecond or nanometer would result in a different history book altogether without Columbus, Joseph Smith, or any other predicted soul who followed. Well of course, the argument is that God is omniscient, after all, so he has already played it out in his head. In order to possess that sort of omniscience, that being would need to possess a program capable of modeling that entire system; the model would have to be full-scale and run in real-time, in which case maybe we are the model inside some other universe's computer program!

I recognize the absurdity of trying to grasp these concepts that typically arise when nerds like me start staring at the sky on a campout. And I do appreciate my own limited understanding in interpreting reality, realizing that there must be some bigger picture that I just can't comprehend. If there are scientists who can comprehend how time is relative and space is curved while I lack the ability to envision those concepts, perhaps there are spiritual experts as well who are refined in the art of communing with a divine dimension, which is an ability I certainly lack. So if I take a leap of faith and take the word of those people in my life who claim to possess that ability, I can accept the notion of a creator, and I can even take a second leap and assume that religions are on to something when they claim that this being would like us to behave in a certain way. But I'm still left rejecting what most religions assume is expected of us; looking at the supposed requirements stops me in my tracks. The notion that God's expectations involve exclusive rites that are inaccessible to most of humanity and will result in punishment if not followed is a stretch I can't quite make, try as I might. Sure, the Bible sums all of the rites and protocols up with *love* as the greatest commandment. But the other 1199 pages sure don't look like love to me.

If a divine being has expectations of any of us, I imagine it would be to not just to love but to respect and treat others as if their views are equally valid to our own, accepting their sincerity in the process. I admit I may be wrong here, but I get no such concession from those who adhere to the program. The message in Mormon testimonies is presented as a *knowledge* of an exclusive doctrine. *Knowing* that an exclusive system is right comes with an accompanying, equivalent *knowledge* that everyone else is wrong. I reject that reality.

The more I interact with others outside the LDS Church, the more I recognize that the level of conviction within the LDS Church is not unique, only our manner of expressing that conviction. And from where I stand – or rather swim – a conviction of Mormon supremacy is as dangerous as white supremacy or an *America First* approach to global politics. The world's most pressing problems require globally coordinated responses; the solutions are never perfect, but the optimal approach requires negotiation and diplomacy. Nationalism, on the other hand, just compiles those problems, especially considering the fervent patriotism that accompanies it when religious fervor unites behind a particular political party. Innocent victims are harmed in the process, where we could have helped instead. Even as an outside expat, I have found recent political trends disheartening to say the least. After watching pre-election polls that gave me a glimmer of hope that Utah would at least turn up independent, for example, I actually felt physically ill when I woke up the morning after the 2016 US

Presidential election to see Utah in red. Watching Motab singing at the inauguration of someone whose policies, rhetoric, and demeanor make me sick, made me – well – even sicker!

I can't lie – this has been a rough ride, but my mental health has seen a drastic improvement since my trial separation began. Maybe that's the only sign I need. Some people express themselves verbally to a therapist to heal their minds, while for me writing seems to do the trick. So for anyone who made it this far, thanks for humoring me and sharing in my therapy sessions. In any case, I don't think anyone should undertake a journey like this without some form of serious therapy! Without question, keeping quiet about my concerns was about the worst advice ever for my own mental health; perhaps it is relevant in a way to lives that have been ruined when young returning missionaries who didn't fit the mold were told to keep their homosexuality to themselves and just go through the heteromotions. I have yet to hear of a successful instance in which that guidance was followed. To me "turning off" my better judgment to mask my disagreement armed me with a two-faced approach to other relationships that did not serve me well in the end.

Just like the voices coming from the Ship, warning that you'll drown out there, your friends on the inside will tell you that it's impossible to be happy outside the safety of the Church – that any happiness you think you feel is actually just worldly pleasure masked in counterfeit joy. True joy can only be sensed on the Ship, after all. Wickedness never was happiness, and you're swimming in the wickedness for having jumped in the water at all. Well, my whole point in sharing the story of the Ship and the nine tales that preceded it is to offer the perspective that there's no monopoly on your happiness, your peace, or your soul. If I had to offer one admonition here, it is that teaching kids that there are no other valid paths is dangerous. I would start with that. Sure, teach them that your current belief system is where you might be placing your bets for now, but acknowledge that you may be wrong. I may be wrong. We all may be wrong. And should they choose differently, every child deserves to be granted just as much validity in the philosophy they choose to adopt. We're all equally clueless, after all. And all I know for now is that the water is just fine for those who want to take a plunge!

Here are some closing lyrics from an analogy in which life is "likened unto" a sea voyage:

*I look to the sea,
Reflections in the waves spark my memory,
Some happy some sad,
I think of childhood friends and the dreams we had.
We live happily forever, so the story goes,
But somehow we missed out on that pot of gold,
But we'll try best that we can to carry on.*

*I'm sailing away,
Set an open course for the Virgin Sea,
'Cause I've got to be free
to face the life that's ahead of me.
On board I'm the captain, so climb aboard,
We'll search for tomorrow on every shore,
And I'll try, oh Lord I'll try to carry on.*

Come sail away, come sail away, come sail away with me!

Now even though I wanted to close this never-ending ending with those Styx lyrics, I'm feeling obliged to add one last glimpse inside my brain to show just how gripping the indoctrination I acquired on the Ship can be, even decades after the fact.

Taking it back to the family photo in the Grand Rapids Press 300 pages ago, right around that time, a traveling youth speaker was making his rounds across the country with a Church fireside entitled *Rock and Roll and the Occult*.

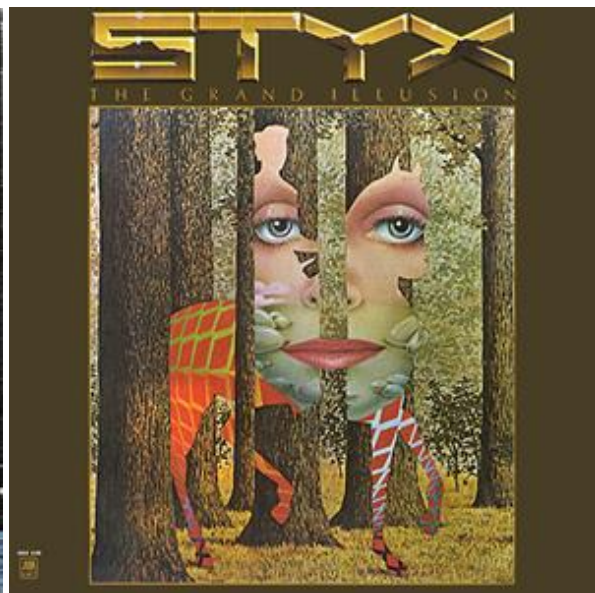
“There’s a feeling I get, when I look to the West,” he began, quoting Stairway to Heaven, “Why West? Because Jesus will appear in the East. Don’t you turn your back on Christ like they did!”

He laid out long list of sordid underworld connections, including these doozy little ditties:

- *KISS* stood for “Kings in Satan’s Service”, and the piper in *Stairway* was the devil himself;
- *RUSH* was “Ruled Under Satan’s Hand” (oh no, not my favorite drummer, Neil “the Professor” Peart!)
- *Queen*...that one was obvious, he said...and they weren’t just perniciously, promiscuously flamboyant, their backmasked lyrics were meant to convince us to smoke a joint!
- *Ozzy* sacrificed animals on stage;
- *AC/DC* (not the Aussies, too!) was code for bisexuals – turned on by either current!
- And *Styx*? Well, that just summed up every evil of rock music: it’s the river to hell!

“Look up the Greek origin in the encyclopedia,” he said, “it’s true!” And by listening to any of the blacklisted groups, he claimed, we’d be inviting darkness into our room, chasing away any good spirit that might otherwise have attended and protected us, and charting ourselves a one-way journey straight down the river Styx. I laugh about it now – as we did then while applying our newfound knowledge to the art of trying to play backmasked lyrics – but almost forty years later, any song by Styx still reminds me of that formative fireside!

Perhaps fittingly, the single “Come Sail Away” is a track from the Styx album entitled “The Grand Illusion.” Keeping to the space theme of the 70s, there is a third verse of the song in which the angels that are beckoning the listener to sail away with them end up being space aliens:



In the song’s lyrics, the sea-bound ship’s passengers willingly climb on board the starship, leaving the world behind. And it’s a good thing they did, because the album art shows a sinking ship!

Maybe the space voyagers will get to their destination after all; and maybe I’m the one living a *Grand Illusion*. Maybe there’s another world out there that I simply can’t imagine, like when Orville the Albatross carries his passengers off into the sunset in the closing scene of the *Rescuers*. Good luck to the passengers! Whatever lies beyond, it’s simply not my circus anymore; and as I watch the flashing lights disappear into space as they chart their course for Kolob, I wish them all *bon voyage*...from my rightful place right here in the sea!

Conclusions

Synopsis

“Things as they really are...will be manifested unto us plainly” Jacob 4:13

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I tend to go on and on when I write; sometimes brevity is required for clarity, though, so I thought I would try to sum up **why I am no longer a believing Mormon in 200 words or less:**

1.



This is Hôr.

*Hôr is not Abraham.*

Joseph Smith and his successors claimed that

*Hôr is Abraham.*

The LDS Church now agrees that

*Hôr is not Abraham.*

The LDS scriptures and website still say

*Hôr is Abraham.*

*Hôr is not Abraham.*

This is Hôr.



Since Joseph Smith misinterpreted the *real* Egyptian characters that became the Book of Abraham, I cannot accept his claim to have translated the *reformed* Egyptian characters that became the Book of Mormon, the keystone of the LDS faith.

2. Joseph Smith admitted that he couldn't discern between the good angels and the bad angels who purportedly instructed him.

When his wife Emma discovered his secret relationships with other women, he claimed an angel told him to do it.

I cannot trust a man who claims that his secret affairs were sanctioned by the same power that guided his mistranslations.

3. Joseph Smith and his successors taught and promoted supposedly God-given, racist principles.

The LDS Church has now denounced and disavowed all racist doctrines, practices, and policies.

When today's LDS Church promotes exclusivity and implements discriminatory and sexist policies, I therefore trust my own conscience over the Church's claims of divine guidance.

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So there you have it; each of the preceding sentences in this synopsis sums up a chapter of this book that I felt compelled to write in an effort to make sense of my former beliefs and to plot my path forward. The rest of the dominos are still falling; I'm not sure which, if any, will remain standing in the end, but these three basic arguments are all it took to initiate the tumbling chain reaction.

And yes, I used chiasmus here. So did Dr. Seuss. I used it because I like it. Not because I'm an ancient Hebrew author. Neither is Dr. Seuss.

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#### 2020 Footnote:

This synopsis was intended for those not wishing to dig through the 300+ pages it took me to reach these relatively simple conclusions. Now that the official style guide for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints requests that all written references include the complete name of the Church, I thought about increasing this odyssey's length even further by replacing the 750 or so references to the discontinued nickname. For now, I've decided to leave it alone, but I must admit that makes me feel a bit two-faced. Here's why:

Whether we're talking about race, nationality, or gender, I respect people's right to be called by their chosen name, and I strive to avoid using names that are offensive, even as those preferences change over time. I've heard ex-members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and non-members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints claim that there are too many syllables in the official name of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to adopt its use...yet they'll deride standing members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints for refusing to adopt pronouns.

Likewise, I've heard member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints say there are too many letters in the LGBTQIA+ acronym and that there are far too many pronouns to keep track of these days. One group derides reporters for dead-naming the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which in their eyes (supported by President Nelson's words) provides Satan with a victory; while the other group derides members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints for dead-naming trans and non-binary youth, which in their eyes (supported by study results), increases suicidality.

I see hypocrisy and validity on both sides, and I strive to strike a respectful balance with my own writing. Although I could add the disclaimer that I wrote these essays before the request was issued by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, that's not why I decided to leave the original text



alone. As I went back through the references to "Mormons" and "Mormonism", I found that most of them apply to the wider Restorationist movement and not just to its modern Brighamite branch. Most of the deconstruction documented in my writing involves challenges to Joseph Smith's claims, and the current Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is just one of many subgroups who trace their origins and doctrines back to that source.

So for now I've decided to let the nickname stand as a reference to the movement as a whole. While I debate how to handle the terminology in the future, could any current members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints please just ask your leaders for a shorter, officially endorsed name...please? I ramble enough as it is!

All nomenclature aside, I'd like to sum this synopsis up as succinctly as I can:

If I look at where I've arrived today after taking the turns described above, I feel like I've found a vantage point with some additional perspective and accompanying simplicity that is perhaps best summarized in some short and sweet lyrics: *I look at the world and I notice it's turning*. Or alternatively, *I'm free falling*...not like a scary, terminal-velocity collision course, but rather in a chilled-out, Petty-esque sort of Zen that could also be encapsulated in a Stardust, anti-gravity view of the world:

*I'm stepping through the door...I'm feeling very still,  
and I'm floating in a most peculiar way,  
and the stars look very different today.  
Planet Earth is blue...[and it's really quite a view!]*

## Now What?

*“Don’t walk away” or “Don’t look back”*

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So this has been my saga – some segments real and others traveled only in proxy as analogous journeys in my head. What a mind-altering experience this has been! And I do mean that quite literally: Over the last few years, I feel like the synapses in my brain have been physically rewired into a whole new lump of grey matter.

People ask what sent me down this path. Well, I mean *non-Mormon* people ask what sent me down this path...as if any single thing could have caused this paradigm shift! As far as LDS friends and family, not a soul has even asked, so they’re left making assumptions about my motives, much as I did with those who preceded me in this journey. So back to the question of what led me down this path, I’d need to go through a timeline of the small chinks in the armor that were ultimately needed to bust a seam in it and help me realize the suit of armor was never protecting me in the first place. My reasons for leaving are like the uncountable straws on the camel’s back that I managed to carry for a while, but if I had to pick out the heaviest, back-breaking straws from among them, here are my *thirteen reasons why* in chronological order:

1. 1989: My BYU anthropology professor, Dr. Ray Matheny, could not and would not defend the Book of Mormon. “That’s odd,” I thought, then *turned it off*.
2. 1990: I took “the Truth about Mormonism” when handed to me at a pageant and learned of many of the allegations about Joseph Smith that have since been confirmed. “That’s interesting,” I thought, then compiled enough apologetic material to defend my case.
3. 1991: As a missionary, a Karl Marx University philosophy professor laid out for me all the reasons why Old Testament stories can’t possibly be literal. My mind was blown, but I reset it, knowing that insights on truth can’t possibly spring from a Godless communist.
4. 1992: I was sent to “rescue” a missionary who had learned the truth about Joseph Smith’s still-under-wraps affairs. God intervened with a strategic injury for the guilty party who had mailed the literature, so I took that as a sign to whistle while I worked.
5. 2003: After vehemently opposing the invasion of Iraq until evidence of UN violations could be confirmed, I dropped my own letter-writing campaigns when President Hinckley claimed in general conference that we just need to trust that those in authority “have access to more information than the people generally,” and that God would hold those protesters responsible “who try to impede or hedge up the way” of the so-called *coalition* of the coerced. And when Utah helped re-elect the prematurely invasive regime after it became clear that there was no such evidence after all, it convinced me that those in authority, including the *seers* at the helm of the Church couldn’t *see* any further than the rest of us. Hearing priesthood leaders testify of the divinity of the Republican Party solidified my distaste for the co-mingling of politics and religion.
6. 2010: When we covered the Old Testament in Sunday School, I started re-reading it for the first time since I was a missionary, trying to prepare myself to teach the lessons. I started from the beginning, looking for something I could see as divine or even inspirational. Sure, I found some of the stories fascinating, but in the same manner as a Stephen King novel or a Hobbit’s journey includes interesting plot twists and life lessons along the way. As far as finding something I could attribute to God, I finally gave up eight books or so in without a clue. “Not my God,” I said probably a hundred times, not fully realizing at the time that an

- orthodox belief in LDS scripture requires a literal interpretation of many of the Old Testament characters that I had long since dismissed as composite amalgamations.
7. 2013. As I read the Church's essay on racism, the refusal to throw the ban under the same condemnation as the explanations for the ban seemed absurdly wrong and conniving.
 8. 2014: When I heard that one of the youth from my former stake had opened fire on his classmates in yet another U.S. school shooting, my complicity in the teaching environment that had fueled his mental illness rather than help heal it became painfully apparent. Subsequent comments from the gun rights activists within the church convinced me further that these are not my people.
 9. 2014: By the time I read the Church's Gospel Topics Essay on polygamy, I was already aware of the actual history, so there weren't many surprises except the disconcertion involved in recognizing my own previous denials of things that were now openly admitted. Even so, reading the spin doctors' twists on the language was disturbing, such as the official admission that Joseph Smith married one of his teen brides "several months before her 15th birthday." I already knew how old Helen Kimball was at the time, but are we really that naïve and does it really make us feel better that being 14.75 years old maybe gave her a few extra months to get through puberty? Just say it like it is! She was 14! Saying instead that she was *almost 15* is manipulative at best.
 10. 2014. In order to prepare myself to teach lessons on the topic, I stumbled across the Church's Book of Abraham essay and hoped it might lead to some material that would confirm the supposed evidence that I had learned about in seminary and BYU religion class lectures. Instead, I was directed to the Grammar and Alphabet of the Egyptian Language, which is an absurd concoction to say the least. Recognizing temple language within the nonsense of the GAEL instantly annihilated any case for historicity and the validity of temple rites in my book. Outright lies in defense of historicity by Muhlestein and other BYU-sanctioned sources solidified my newfound stance.
 11. 2015: A series of suicides among the teenage children of my Mormon friends prompted me to look into the reasons why the LDS suicide rate is so high, and the statistics were truly horrifying. Watching the PR machine spin into action to refute any culpability in response to calls for action from affected members of the public was disappointing when so much more could be done to combat the trend.
 12. 2015: The November Policy. Refer back to #11. Enough said.
 13. 2016: *Going Clear* and similar exposés *exposed* my hypocritical finger-pointing at the folly and sheer lunacy of Scientology's origin story, which forced me to the same appraisal of my own church's claims. As the year closed out, even the pseudo-scientific E-meters could have picked up a disturbance in the force as Mormons helped propel a madman into office.

So that's the state I found myself in while pounding away on the piano keys at Temple View, weighing the questions associated with these events out against the miracles I had witnessed along the way. I was an active, practicing Mormon through each of these steps, serving in bishoprics, teaching classes, and driving my kids to seminary. Despite each of these realizations, I still clung to the hope that there was truth in the overall message, and I justified my continued participation, pushing my own kids through Mormonism's rites of passage. But I also came to an overarching realization that by keeping my mouth shut about my concerns I was being inherently dishonest in my dealings with my fellow men (and women), if I can frame it in the context of a temple recommend interview question.

As I cautiously began to express my unorthodox beliefs to other practicing Mormons in private, I found former mission companions, BYU roommates, teachers, youth leaders, bishops,

stake presidents, friends, and family members who had likewise lost their faith in the exclusivity of Mormonism and the literal truth of Mormon scripture – but many of whom just walked through the motions as apparently active Mormons because of the cultural pressures. Frankly, many of them still enjoyed the culture and simply weren't willing to turn their back on it by speaking up about their own beliefs and accompanying doubts. Maybe that lifestyle works for others, but as I hit my mid-life hump, I realized that approach wasn't going to work for the second act of my own life. I couldn't believe my fellow meta-Mormons were willing to live with that hypocrisy, but then I realized that it was much easier to point fingers at them and see clarity in their situations than it was for myself. So I began to dissect my own beliefs by making up stories that bore some resemblance to my own. After each one, I asked myself what the next step should be, taking a step back to look at the direction of the signs on the subway walls and tenement halls that I had never bothered to read before.

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*Do or die*

I was deeply embedded and heavily invested in Mormonism – so much so, that I couldn't actually formulate my next steps without these out-of-body narratives to escape my own indoctrination. The ten parables were for my own extrasensory benefit. I don't know if anyone else will find relevance to their own journeys, but as fully ingrained as I was in my faith, I simply could not allow what I held dear to slip through my fingers without first stepping back and asking myself what I would advise anyone else to do in a range of similar situations.

That dichotomy takes me back to the dilemma I was facing when I started my ramblings in the first place. In essence, each of the roundabout stories culminates with a single, two-pronged fork in the road. Looking back on the previous chapters, it's a bit embarrassing that it took me over 300 pages – with ten analogous journeys to Kenya, Cleveland, Cairo, Gallipoli, Troutdale, Stuttgart, Brentwood, New York, Cougar Stadium, and the open sea – just to answer a single question:



If I read each story objectively before inserting parallels to Mormonism, I'm left to decide what the main character should do without introducing any bias. Then, when I apply the parallels, the answer should be just as clear. But it's not that simple...after the first one I'd find myself saying, "OK, how about two out of three?" and so on until I had repeated the process 10 times and made the chance for a comeback damn near impossible. So in the ten analogies I've shared here, how

should the characters act? What should they do next? And who am I in the story? Each one effectively comes down to a yes-no question of whether to make a change or stay the same. Should the characters stay on target or abort the mission? To flee or not to flee...

Movies typically favor individuality over systemic conformity, so if any of these scenarios played out on screen, the outcome may be predictably obvious: Splitsville! I can guarantee, however, that in my case, the answers were not obvious. Like the voice in Luke's comlink telling him to "Stay on Target," I legitimately considered the continued push toward Mormonism's target as a valid choice at every step of the way as I worked my way through these ten hypothetical exercises:

1. What should the Shamanite messenger say after ringing the doorbell?  
*Stay on target:* "Hello, my name is Elder Price, and I would like to share with you the most amazing book..."  
*Or abort:* "Hello, my name is Elder Price, and Meister Bäcker is not Nebuchadnezzar, so I shouldn't even be at your doorstep until we get that sorted out. Sorry!"
2. Should Breslen's dad sign her baptismal form?  
*Stay on target:* Sign the form, dress in white, and start filling the font.  
*Or abort:* Ask her to consider waiting until she's 18 so she can decide for herself.
3. Should Tony Morgan make the phone call or toss Gina's the number in the trash?  
*Stay on target:* Listen to Elder Brown and trash it!  
*Or abort:* Call her from the first airport payphone he can find.
4. Should Commander Crowe fall back in line and order his son over the top?  
*Stay on target:* Blow the literal whistle and send his sons into battle.  
*Or abort:* Blow the figurative whistle on the doomed operation.
5. Should Yarid's imam keep teaching lessons the same way?  
*Stay on target:* Keep to the status quo by sharing God's deadly retribution for sinners.  
*Or abort:* Apologize to the victims and denounce scriptural violence.
6. Should Wolfgang Gaslinger include the Nazi history and Dieselgate in VW's company history?  
*Stay on target:* Listen to Ferry and redact the story.  
*Or abort:* Tell it like it is.
7. Should Travis Cooper keep his mouth shut about Buffy's body paint?  
*Stay on target:* Listen to Kaelin, throw away the zoom lens, and keep his distance.  
*Or abort:* Publish his photographs.
8. Should Katie Pilchek threaten to leave Mateo if he won't remove the prostitute's picture?  
*Stay on target:* Trust her husband's espionage stories.  
*Or abort:* File for divorce.
9. Should the snare drummer listen to Coach Tommy and get back in line?  
*Stay on target:* Plow through the field no matter who is in the way.  
*Or abort:* Try other instruments and have fun playing them.
10. Should the man overboard hold onto the lifeline being thrown from the Ship?  
*Stay on target:* Listen to the Captain's orders and climb back aboard!  
*Or abort:* Cut the line, build a life raft, and drift away.

I'm guessing with any bias removed, most people would advise these characters to abort the mission, drop the charade, take a stand, and tell the truth. But once we introduce religion into the mix, the advice that came to me from fellow members and from up the ranks in the Church was consistently to stay on target, take their word for it, keep my mouth shut, and fall in line.

Nathan ends up pointing his finger at David as the justifiably culpable suspect who recognizes his own guilt after hearing the parable of the little lamb; the stories I've shared here are

not intended to point fingers at anyone other than myself, and in case after case, I likewise ended up recognizing my own culpability in a charade that I couldn't back up. I now find myself in that hot seat awaiting my sentence for a criminal charge to which I have pled guilty. Nathan's parable of the ewe really leaves no question as to how the rich man should actually have treated the poor man; the correct answer is a foregone conclusion. But how should he have been judged for his abuse? That answer perhaps involves a more elusive balance between justice and mercy. What is the appropriate sentence? Having recognized himself in the story, what should David do? Whether or not he was remorseful, he was still cursed for his actions, and the Bible claims his penance included having his own favorite – albeit rebellious – lamb taken from him. Having recognized myself in each of these ten stories, what should I do about it now?

I hate to be binary about things, but if the message in the bottle boiled down to the simple yes-or-no question: "Would you use our services again?" what would the answer be? For those still in it, I guess there's an in-between option, which is to change the way things are done. But as for myself? Ten out of ten mind trips told me to get the hell out of the situation. There isn't a single case where I would tell the character to take the path of *Conformonism*. So what's it going to be for me? I'm ten for ten on the survey cards: I'm ticking the *No* box; my answer is *Mormonschism*.

In documenting and trying to justify my own journey, I realize that I haven't presented any new discoveries at all. I haven't unearthed any previously unknown sources; I haven't had angelic visions proclaiming the correctness of my path; and I haven't discovered any elusive, smoking gun that would convince the masses to head for the exit signs. The guns I've pointed to have been smoking for years, some since the very inception of Mormonism. Of themselves, they aren't elusive at all; they're simply ignored by believers who are immune to smoke, or they are explained away with preposterously intricate back stories.

Now I'm under no delusion that reciting these discrepancies would ever be likely to make a noticeable difference within the ranks of Mormonism. So why bother writing this at all if it's not going to make any substantial difference? I guess for myself, I needed the analogies that I've written here to transport myself into new realms. As for everyone else, other authors and movie makers have provided plenty of well-known examples that probably make better analogies than the ones I've come up with here. But no matter how it is formulated, the end effect of uncovering a smoke-and-mirrors illusion is the same: once you've seen the apparatus, gone down the rabbit hole, looked behind the curtain, run Truman's sailboat into the wall, or exited the Matrix, unseeing and uncomprehending the truth simply isn't an option anymore!

Everything I've relied on to reach my own decisions is freely accessible to anyone else in this interconnected, online world; in fact, much of that information is available in published comments that fall within the current generation's 160-character attention span, making something as long-winded as this write-up completely redundant. For those who do end up digging through these words, some will nod their heads in agreement; others will shake their heads in disgust; and perhaps a few might see enough similarities to their own circumstances to embark on an uncharted journey of discovery.

But if history does indeed repeat itself, most will simply continue to travel whatever path their parents set them on. And that's just fine. I'm not promoting a mass exit, after all; I'm promoting mass tolerance. And not just *tolerance* of those differing opinions but the genuine acceptance that those opinions may be valid and that they might represent just as much actual truth and knowledge from their own adherents' perspective as one's own. I spent over forty years of my life thinking that the world that Joseph Smith had envisioned – this plan of salvation that he

imagined up – was the overarching framework itself, and that the rest of the world unwittingly resided inside of that rigged structure. But when I found out that the whole world that Joseph Smith envisioned was concocted within his own mind rather than placed there by some external force, initially I felt confined within that space. Only gradually did I allow myself to see that the universe has room for billions of other equally creative worlds formed within the heads, hearts, and souls of people like Joseph Smith. And when I realized – perhaps obviously now in hindsight – that I don't, in fact, live in any of those worlds, the shrinking bubble simply burst. As I escaped its pull, I could see life from a new vantage point that opened my eyes to billions upon billions of other bubbles. I don't know how else to describe it, but it has been quite a trip so far!

For years I accepted the notion that you'd be a lost soul – that you would only amount to half a person – without your testimony of the gospel according to Joseph Smith. Apostasy or “losing” one's testimony is presumed to leave you with a missing hole in your soul. To wake up and realise that there is simply no gaping void – that you're actually the same person with or without Mormonism – is strangely relieving and now blatantly obvious from an outsider's perspective. When you realize that God hasn't gone and clouded your mind with ignorance or a permanent stupor of thought, but rather blessed you with insights and empathy and perspective and other important gifts to replace the former dogma – and that you are just as spiritually alive and awake and stupidly ignorant as you were with your conviction of Mormonism – it leaves you unable to return to the solitary confinement shared by the small, elite club you used to isolate your thoughts with.

Hitting the water is scary. And it seems like darkness at first; but fear of the unknown is often perceived as something pernicious, when in fact, it is the path to liberation. I guess the whole point of this message is to say that the water's fine out here. It's not as scary as they said it would be; in fact, it isn't scary at all. For those who have spent their days inside the belly of the Ship, try jumping off the edge and see if you agree. As for me, the amount of happiness that's tied into Joseph Smith was surprisingly less than I had assumed. I, for one, am much more comfortable walking down the street today knowing that the person passing me has an equally valid view of life than I ever was with my previously exclusive view of the world.

Within Mormon circles, you're bound to hear statements like this time and again: “I don't know what I would be, where I would be, or who I would be without the Restoration.” Well, I'll tell you what you would be. You'd be just fine. If you love your family and friends and you care about people and the planet, you know what? When Joseph Smith drops out of your life's philosophy, you'll still find that you love your family and friends and that you care about people and the planet. You think everything's going to change and go downhill; but then you wake up, and you realize it only changed for the better. I imagine it's like the cliché superhero who thinks there was power in the costume...but then realizes that the uniform had nothing to do with anything. You don't need the outfit to do great things. In fact, if my own experience is any indication, the costume can actually serve a detrimental purpose, allowing its wearer to get away with things they shouldn't have done.

Well I'd better quit with the analogies before I start into another chapter here. I could go on and on and on and on. And I already have. And now it's time to let it go. I'll throw this out into the ether in case it can help someone else along their journey. This journey has consumed a lot of my time and effort over the last few months. But now I have no further interest in occupying my time with the mundane details that overshadowed the first half of my life's perspective. There are enough others out there who will spend the rest of their days debating why one should or shouldn't follow these made-up rules. I choose to let it go. I'll never have the power to change the mind of someone who believes God has spoken to them. So go ahead. Keep your own faith. I'll find my new course. Let's just try to get along on this journey. A couple of song lines come to mind as I look back at my

empty chair from the uncharted road ahead: One from Joy Division in the 80s and another from Oasis in the 90s. I'll try my best to follow both points of advice:

*"Don't walk away in silence...Don't look back in anger"*



*The End(ish)*



## 2023 Epilogue

*"Being honest means choosing not to lie, steal, cheat, or deceive in any way. When you are honest, you build strength of character that will allow you to be of great service to God and others. You will be blessed with peace of mind and self-respect."* - For the Strength of Youth, 2011, Page 19

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[Missionary interview at the Ensign Ward chapel in Salt Lake City, March 2023. Bishop Jared Summers welcomes prospective missionary Kevin Larson into his office and asks him to open the interview with a prayer. Being a special occasion, they both kneel, and Kevin offers a heart-felt invocation, inviting the Spirit to accompany the meeting. They get up off their knees, Kevin puts his mission application papers on the desk, and they both sit back in their chairs.]

BISHOP

Kevin, good to see you today; I'm so pleased you've decided to serve a mission!

KEVIN

Thanks Bishop, sorry I'm a few minutes late.

BISHOP

That's ok, I---

KEVIN (interrupting)

Actually, the reason I'm late is because on the way here I decided to turn around and help out a homeless person I saw down the street.

BISHOP

Well, that's awfully kind of you.

KEVIN

Thanks, but I feel a little funny about it now. He had this sign saying he had lost his job and needed a meal. There's a McDonald's right across the street, so I offered to buy him a Big Mac.

BISHOP

That's great – I hope he liked it.

KEVIN

Well, that's where his story gets real sus. He said he'd rather have the cash so he can pick out what he wants himself. So I gave him \$5.

BISHOP

OK, but that's barely enough for a Happy Meal.

KEVIN

But that's not the point. I kept looking back after I left, and he was still holding up the same sign, even after I had given him enough for a meal!

BISHOP

So you think he made up the story on his sign?

KEVIN

Yes – I don't think he needs a meal at all and probably never had a job to lose in the first place; he's probably just going to use my money on liquor!

BISHOP

Well, you might be right, but it was good of you to think of him, no matter what he decides to spend it on.

KEVIN

I don't know...to make it even worse, other people kept handing him cash, and he never put down the sign! I just wish I had known about his con before I handed over my money.

BISHOP

Well, that's on his conscience now, not yours. Should we dive into the interview?

KEVIN

Sure!

BISHOP

So I'm just going to read the questions straight from the Church's standard missionary recommendation interview guide. But before we start, let's quickly talk about the finances and make sure a mission is feasible for you at the moment.

KEVIN

I'm all set there, so we can move on.

BISHOP

But last time we spoke you mentioned that you were having some trouble finding a job to earn some mission money; so did you end up finding one?

KEVIN

No, I was really busy with my online coding classes this semester, so I didn't have time for a job. But I found something better!

BISHOP

Really?

KEVIN

Yes, have you ever heard of GoFundMe?

BISHOP

Sure, isn't that where people raise money for all sorts of causes?

KEVIN

Exactly! While I was Googling the costs of mission supplies, I ran across some GoFundMe pages for other missionaries; so I thought I'd give it a try myself.

BISHOP

Interesting...so how much did you earn?

KEVIN

Well, I haven't told anyone else yet, but it's about \$60,000, give or take...

BISHOP, gasping:

Wow, that's a lot!

KEVIN

But I haven't checked the balance yet today.

BISHOP

You mean you're still taking in more money?

KEVIN

Sure, people are still offering, so I wouldn't want to turn them down.

BISHOP

But a two-year mission costs less than \$10,000. Do they know that's more than you need?

KEVIN

Well no, of course not; if I told them I already had enough, they'd stop donating.

BISHOP

But don't all GoFundMe pages list the amount that's been raised?

KEVIN

Strictly speaking, yes. But here's where my coding classes came in handy. I was able pay one of my course tutors to write some code that helped me hack into my own GoFundMe page script and change the font of the text showing the amount. We made the text white, so it's completely invisible against the white background.

BISHOP

That sounds a bit fishy.

KEVIN

Not at all; technically the number is still there, so it's totally legit!

BISHOP

Well, I'm not so sure about that. Even if nobody noticed the hidden figures, wouldn't it raise some red flags with GoFundMe when that much money shows up on the tax statements?

KEVIN

Yes, you'd think so. But they only have to report accounts with more than \$10,000, so I got a bit creative to avoid hitting that threshold.

BISHOP

And how exactly did you do that?

KEVIN

Easy, I just made up other missionary names, set up more profiles, and started transferring money from my original profile into the new ones before any of them got to \$10,000; so it all stayed neatly under the radar screen.

BISHOP

And all this time, you kept telling people you needed more money to finance your mission?

KEVIN

Yes, but technically I didn't tell them which mission they were helping me out with. I'm planning to get married in the temple, and then we'll have kids, and then our kids will have kids...and then my wife and I will serve a couples mission as grandparents. Maybe even more than one!

BISHOP

But that's so far in the future.

KEVIN

Sure, but you never know; we might need the funds for a rainy day in the meantime.

BISHOP

\$60,000 would get you through quite a few rainy days!

KEVIN

That's right; it really puts my mind at ease to know I've got some backup security funds to get me through anything life might throw at me.

BISHOP

I'll bet...so nobody else suspected anything?

KEVIN

Actually, last month a donor ran across one of the fake accounts and noticed that I had accidentally left one of my e-mail addresses in the profile, so they reported me to GoFundMe.

BISHOP

And did they contact you?

KEVIN

Yep, I got a call from one of their reps saying I can't use white fonts or fake profiles.

BISHOP

So did you get things fixed up?

KEVIN

Yes, in my own way. They told me I had to list everything I've taken in from all of the profiles on my main page.

BISHOP

Makes sense.

KEVIN

But that would have been really problematic – the donations would have stopped since everyone would see that the goal had been reached!

BISHOP

And then some! That's understandable on their part, because you've got more than you need.

KEVIN

But it's such a good cause, I'd hate to deprive them of donating to it. So instead of changing the font color, I asked my tutor to write me some code that would let me comply with the request to list the total amount. I suggested shrinking the text down to a really, really small font size that would make the amount unreadable.

BISHOP

But isn't that the same thing they were telling not to do with the color?

KEVIN

Well, that's what my tutor thought too. In fact, when he found out I had been reported to GoFundMe's fraud department, he was afraid we might get into some sort of trouble with the lawyers. He said he didn't feel right about skirting the rules with his coding. So he just quit.

BISHOP

OK, that's a relief. So you decided not to go through with the unreadable font size?

KEVIN

No, are you kidding? I'm about to go on a mission! That's the Lord's work, and every penny that people are donating is sacred. Imagine the good I'll be able to do with all of the donations that keep rolling in! I wasn't going to drop the whole thing just because one tutor decided to quit!

BISHOP

So what did you do?

KEVIN

Easy, I just hired another one who was willing to shrink down the text.

BISHOP

So you got away with it?

KEVIN

Yeah, for a while, but then some anonymous donor reported me again – must have been someone with really good eyes to notice the tiny font.

BISHOP

Or maybe your original tutor turned on you and blew the whistle.

KEVIN

Oh he wouldn't do that. We're in the same frat at school, and he pinky-swore that he'd never tell. But whoever it was, someone reported me again, and GoFundMe decided that I was breaking the rules.

BISHOP

So were there any consequences?

KEVIN

Yes, since they had already warned me about it, this time they ended up turning me in to the authorities.

BISHOP

Wow, that sounds serious!

KEVIN

Not really; because of my age it only went up to the juvenile court.

BISHOP

Still, that sounds like a big deal. So how did that turn out?

KEVIN

Oh, it was nothing. The judge just ended up sticking me with a fine.

BISHOP

And how much did that set you back?

KEVIN

\$1.50

BISHOP

A dollar fifty? And you got to keep the \$60,000?

KEVIN

Yeah, that sounds crazy, huh? What worked out even better for me is that he thought my tutor should get a slap on the wrist, too. So we got to split the fine between us.

BISHOP

So you each only ended up paying 75 cents?

KEVIN

No, no, we didn't split it evenly. I convinced the judge to stick my tutor with most of the fine. The tutor was afraid I'd somehow put him out of business with future tutoring work, so he didn't put up a stink. So I only had to come up with 25 cents.

BISHOP

So he had to pay five times your amount?

KEVIN

Yes, because he should have known better.

BISHOP

But you should have known better too. He advised you not to do it, and you told him to write the code anyway.

KEVIN

Yep, funny how things work sometimes; but that's what the judge decided.

BISHOP

So in the end you only paid a quarter? And you got to keep the \$60,000?

KEVIN

Yep, seems like the fine itself was just a token amount; the judge decided that the embarrassment of getting caught would be enough punishment for me.

BISHOP

And was it?

KEVIN

Well, there actually wasn't much embarrassment to speak of; I ended up getting around that by sending an e-mail to everyone who donated to my mission fund.

BISHOP

It's good to hear that you owned up to it and came clear; so what did you tell them in the letter?

KEVIN

Well, I just said my tutor had given me some bad advice, and it was a real shame that mistakes were made.

BISHOP

But your tutor told you it wasn't right, and you didn't follow his advice. You were the one telling the tutor what to do. The mistakes were made by you!

KEVIN

Well sure, but I wouldn't want the donors to think less of me by admitting that in writing.

BISHOP

But don't you feel bad about fooling them?

KEVIN

Come on bishop, this is what everyone does.

BISHOP

Well, I don't know about that. Maybe before we go any further, we should just dive into the interview questions. Let's jump straight to Question #3, which has me a bit concerned:

"Do you feel that you have fully repented of past transgressions?"

KEVIN

Of course I have; I went through the court and had to pay the price.

BISHOP

The twenty-five cents?

KEVIN

Yep.

BISHOP

That really doesn't make much of a dent in the \$60,000 that you kept.

KEVIN

Well, that's what I was legally ordered to pay, so I paid it, and the matter is now closed. It's a done deal; I don't think any further apologies are needed.

BISHOP

But aren't apologies part of the repentance process?

KEVIN

Not necessarily. Does the Church apologize?

BISHOP

Well no, I guess not; I think they'd be worried about opening up a bunch of liabilities.

KEVIN

Well, then I assume that should hold for the rest of us too. I don't want people suing me or trash talking me over this, saying I tricked them into donating. They'd want their money back.

BISHOP

Don't you think it would be fair to offer refunds given the circumstances?

KEVIN

No, they took their own risks when they donated to me and trusted me with their money.

BISHOP

Well, maybe they shouldn't have. After all, it sounds like everyone who donated to your fund still believes this whole thing was your tutor's idea. In reality, you know full well that the hidden fonts and fake profiles were your ideas all along.

KEVIN

Yep.

BISHOP

And you even admitted that in writing to the juvenile court judge?

KEVIN

Yep.

BISHOP

OK, this is all a bit troubling. Maybe I'll just skip ahead a bit and get straight to Question #6, which includes asking for an explanation of being honest in all you say and do. Let me just read this one straight from the interview guide under the paragraph "Honesty and Integrity":

"Be honest with yourself, others, and God at all times. Being honest means choosing not to lie, steal, cheat, or deceive in any way. When you are honest, you build strength of character that will allow you to be of great service to God and others. You will be blessed with peace of mind and self-respect. You will be trusted by the Lord and will be worthy to enter into His holy temples".

Realizing that the Brethren are calling out deception with this statement, how are you going to answer to that?

KEVIN

Well, speaking of the Brethren, aren't there any interview questions about church leaders?

BISHOP

Sure, Question #4 asks "Do you have a testimony that Russell M. Nelson is a prophet of God? And will you share your testimony of President Nelson?"

KEVIN

Well, I can definitely answer both of those questions with a huge "yes!"

BISHOP

But what about tricking people into donating mission funds that you don't need?

KEVIN

Well, we just heard again in General Conference that the current prophet trumps everything. And what I've done with these extra mission funds is exactly what President Nelson has done with the extra tithing money the Church has collected from donors.

BISHOP

Hmm...well I hadn't thought about it that way. I guess you've got a point there. Maybe we shouldn't be expecting more from you than we do from our prophet.

KEVIN

Yes, I totally agree---

BISHOP

...or maybe we should be expecting more from our prophet...

KEVIN

What? Listen, I need to get going soon; so are you happy to sign off on my papers?

BISHOP

I guess so; you've sure given me a lot to think about, though.

[Bishop Summers signs the papers and puts them in a large manila envelope. They again kneel on the floor, and the Bishop offers the benediction. They get up to leave and walk to the outside door together, where they spot a stranger walking down the street.]

KEVIN

Hey look, it's the homeless guy I ran into earlier.

BISHOP

Well, maybe you should give him another \$5.

KEVIN

No, I think I've given him enough already.

BISHOP

\$5? That's nothing compared to the \$60,000 you've got!

KEVIN

Hey, technically I'll be volunteering my time, working really long hours for the next two years. If I stayed home, I could be earning \$40 an hour with a coding job.

BISHOP

I guess that's true.

KEVIN

So the way I see it, I'm giving up \$250,000 of lost income by going on a mission. So I'm doing way more than my part in terms of charity.

BISHOP

Sounds like a lot when you put it that way.

KEVIN

Well yeah! I can't think of any of my non-LDS friends who are that charitable. In terms of good will, it makes me really happy to know that I'm at the top of the list!

BISHOP

If you say so. But still, don't you think that guy could use another 5-spot?

KEVIN

Nah, my money's better put elsewhere.

BISHOP

Do you think that's what Jesus would say?

KEVIN

Don't the signs outside the Salt Lake Temple say we should avoid giving direct handouts. Why should it be any different outside a chapel?

BISHOP

Touché...have a great mission, Kevin. I'm going home now to rethink my life.

Kevin's LDS Mission Fund



Kevin Larson is organizing this fundraising appeal

Hi! I'm Kevin and I'm looking forward to serving a full-time mission for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints for the next two years. I really want to serve but I don't have enough funds at the moment. If you can spare a few dollars, please donate to my mission fund so I will be able to serve the Lord without financial stress.

Donate

Share

USD raised of \$10,000 goal

12 donations

Share

Donate now

Anonymous
\$50 - 9 months ago

Anonymous
\$25 - 9 months ago

Anonymous
\$100 - 9 months ago

Anonymous
\$100 - 9 months ago

Anonymous
\$1,490 - 9 months ago

See all

See top

Organiser and beneficiary

Kevin Larson
Organizer and Beneficiary
Salt Lake City, UT

Contact

Wikipedia article with news references:

[2023 SEC charges against the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and Ensign Peak Advisors](#)