

Why I Left the Mormon Church

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After a lifetime of committed membership, I have left the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. For me, the Church was not just a religion, but a deeply-held personal belief, a beloved family tradition, a total way of life. The transition was a 15-year period of indecision from fear, and ultimately cost me my 32-year marriage. When I finally left, I was surprised how easy it was. I felt relieved and clear. Because of that, I knew I had done the right thing. I was free to move on. Free to be real.

Background

I was born and raised in the Mormon Church. Both sides of my family came out of the early days of the Church in the 1800's. These determined people pioneered in the western wilderness on the strength of their faith. They knew that they were creating a better life under a divine star. This was and still is my heritage.

I had the full measure of Mormon training and acculturation: life-long religious instruction at home, church, and school. I was a dedicated missionary for the Church, a student at Brigham Young University for eight years, and married in a Church temple. I was fully active in all phases of Church life. I was a "true believer"—sure and secure in my faith. It was good, true, and beautiful, and I enjoyed it.

The Church claims to be the one and only true church—the only Church that Jesus personally authorizes and directs, and as such, the only reliable source of spiritual truth.

I embraced that. Moreover, the Church was my only source of spiritual sustenance. I was not interested in other sources of spiritual information because I was sure that the truth was no where else to be had. For me, other sources were tainted, misguided, incorrect, or even evil. All spiritual questions were either already answered or answerable within the Mormon scope. The teachings were pure and good. I had no doubts. I was fully convinced and totally committed.

The First Little Cracks

When I began missionary service for the Church in 1962, I was given a “plan for teaching the Gospel” to use in converting others to the Church. This plan was usually referred to as “the discussions” and contained teaching instructions and a carefully crafted script designed to lead investigators inexorably to baptism, the ultimate measure of our success. To refer to that process as “discussions” however, was actually to engage a euphemism, as it was in effect a lock-step catechism. This plan was presented to us as having been “inspired”, or in other words, it had the imprimatur of the “Spirit of God” as its authoritative source. We were told to follow it conscientiously and we would be “blessed with success.” I accepted without reservation the proposition that it was inspired, and set about wholeheartedly to use it as directed. It became immediately obvious, however, that in practice the plan was not only logically faulty in a few respects, but its directions for application were in some cases inappropriate. Indeed, its general effect on investigators was transparently manipulative. Even though we were given explicit instruction to follow this plan literally, we also got informal supplemental instruction that we were to “follow the spirit” in adapting the plan to circumstances as may arise, which was, in effect, a tacit recognition of the faults of the plan and license to use common sense. These conflicting instructions were tricky to resolve, and we generally did so by simply ignoring the conflict. The dissonance of the mixed messages nevertheless lingered and undermined my confidence in the authority from which the plan came.

Some years earlier, the war in Vietnam had been gaining momentum and arousing greater domestic opposition. As consternation grew in the Church membership over this issue, especially among the many families with young men being conscripted into the war, Hugh Brown, one of the highest authorities in the Church, spoke at a general assembly at BYU and affirmed that the Church not only upheld the “laws of the land” but also specifically supported US involvement in the war. The statement was in the context of many years of pronouncements against communism from high Church authorities. This position was directly reaffirmed to me by another Church authority, Boyd Packer, in a private conversation I had with him over my reservations about the war. With my reservations answered, and like a loyal subject, I volunteered for duty in Vietnam in 1970, believing that I would be helping stop the spread of dreaded communism. As an intelligence officer there, my perspective on the war began to shift. Years later, I was finally able to admit the truth of what had become abundantly clear: US involvement in Vietnam, by any analysis and from any perspective, was catastrophically wrong, its devastation to the Vietnamese and to ourselves was enormous, and no positive outcome was achieved. I was ashamed for my country and disillusioned with my Church authorities for not having seen it coming. It was their job as inspired leaders to be “the voice or warning” against such debacles. The Church’s support for the war has now been largely ignored and forgotten. But I have not forgotten. For me it was a decided failure of Church leadership that cannot be explained away. Mormon leader and attorney Bruce McConkie liked to call priesthood leaders “legal administrators.” Mormon leaders were definitely administering, but they were certainly not looking like “prophets, seers, and revelators.” In this critical sense, there was neither prophecy nor backbone. It is one thing to make pious words from the pulpit, but when such words lead to five million real people who really die in the real world, then it would seem time for real accountability.

While a student at BYU in the mid ‘70’s, I attended a University-sponsored forum to which speakers with enlightening and uplifting messages were invited from various fields of inquiry outside the University and Church community. Raymond Moody (author of *Life After Life*) spoke at such an assembly about his collection and analysis

of near-death experiences (NDEs). Moody's work established the existence of an afterlife and a spirit world in a non-religious and empirical way. I was fascinated to learn of this external evidence of my faith, but my emotions were mixed, because I couldn't help wondering with some disappointment about why our many fine LDS scholars had not long ago picked up on this research opportunity that had rich potential to make this important spiritual understanding more accessible to the larger public. (Mormon belief is a closer match to NDE reports than that of most denominations.) I couldn't answer the question, but I did notice first, that Moody's NDE research had uncovered much more significant information and understanding about the non-physical world and afterlife than were available from Church sources. Moreover, some of the NDE information that came out was at variance with the teachings of the Church. The Church had represented itself to me to be the channel of pure, revealed truth, and suddenly it appeared to have lost its lead.

Once this awareness formed, I noticed the same phenomenon in other areas of inquiry, especially the social sciences, where I would have expected the initiatives and performance of our LDS scholars to have been naturally abundant and forthcoming. I particularly expected us to shine in psychology because of what we perceived to be our correct understanding of the nature of man. Instead, our contributions were conspicuously absent in the presence of a flood of significant development outside the Church, particularly in the human potential movement. The attitude of scholars within the Church seemed not to be one of pushing the boundaries of knowledge, but instead of staying safely within the boundaries of the established Mormon worldview, as if the range of their inquiry were co-opted by their Church status or livelihood. The University was just then celebrating its centennial under the theme of the pursuit of truth. The irony was not lost on me.

My interest in near-death experience continued as a result of my little son's accidental death. My deep love for him and consciousness of his new state led me to search for deeper understanding. I subscribed to the Journal of Near-death Studies, joined the International Association of Near-death Studies, and attended its conferences and local

meetings. The many firsthand experiences I heard in that forum touched me deeply and spiritually. They had a greater ring of authenticity than most of the many “testimonies” of spiritual experiences I had heard in lifelong Church membership, and were to my mind much more mature in their understanding and depth of spirit. I found that this source was providing me far more immediate and satisfying spiritual nourishment than all the scripture reading, priesthood meetings, and gospel doctrine classes I had been experiencing in the Church. I was hungry and this was a source that was feeding me. While thousands who had a near-death experience were joyously telling of their profound life transformations from a brief encounter with the divine, the “special witnesses of Christ” leading the Church were conspicuously silent, some holding that such experience was “too sacred to speak of.” It seemed a bit hollow.

The Next Cracks Appear

After finishing graduate work in linguistics and education at BYU in 1976, I found professional work in the translation department of LDS Church headquarters in Salt Lake City. Even though I thought I already knew a lot about language from my study of languages and linguistics, wrestling with semantic problems in the world of translation taught me more of importance than I expected to learn. My main discovery was how metaphoric language is and how much language interpretation is a function of our unconscious beliefs. I began to see that what we believed the scriptures to say was a reflection of our apriori beliefs rather than what they actually said. I began to discover passages of scripture that the Church held as literal were actually metaphoric. Bible stories with a historical basis had so much missing that they made little sense, but the Church had no illuminating insight to offer. Such shallow conceptions suddenly seemed disappointingly amiss of the richer, underlying meaning of the scripture. I began to see the Church’s interpretations as a default for the absence of true spiritual insight. I yearned for a better exposition of the underlying truth, but did not find it in the Church.

When translating, one must of course understand the meaning of what is to be translated before it can be rendered in another language. But this understanding must go well beyond the kind of understanding we normally content ourselves with when we casually read something in our own language. Because the language into which one translates has a different set of assumptions about reality, and different requirements on what is to be made explicit in language, translators often find themselves in the awkward position of necessarily having to interpolate an author's intended meaning. Their process of inquiry entails a high degree of scrutiny of the source text and the context from which it sprang. In making such careful analyses of texts by Church authorities, we found occasional but disconcerting contradictions between authorities and even within the teachings of the same authority. For example, a book that has attained near standard-work status, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, was found to be riddled with inconsistencies, contradictions, and implausible authenticity. We had our way of explaining away such irregularities, but I could not escape the feeling of disappointment in the "oracles of God." I began to wonder if the emperor had any clothes.

During my time there, the Church Translation Department was funding a major research and development effort at Brigham Young University on automatic language processing—that is, computer translation of natural language. There were those at the University who believed they were inspired to do such a thing, which would result in Church scripture and literature going out in multiple languages quickly and effectively. This vision was easily picked up at the University and at Church headquarters, where inspired vindications of our life are welcome. The project got a lot of press and was the darling of the then university president, Dallin Oaks, now a high Church authority, who entertained visions of this project bringing fame to the University and hence to the Church. About ten years and over three million dollars later, it finally became clear that the project was not delivering on its promise, so it was abandoned. After that, no one mentioned anything about the "divine inspiration" that was supposed to have guided the project. Actually, what was said was mainly nothing at all. Though it was the largest line item in our translation budget for years, it didn't even make it into a detailed history of Church translation during that period written by the department director. It was as if

it never happened. Another senior administrator would not cooperate in a post analysis of the project and sequestered all documentation. In the world of politics, this would be called a “cover-up.” Today, inexpensive commercial software is readily available that translates natural languages, but was not written at BYU. So much for Mormon inspiration, I thought.

In the translation department, I participated in a project to study The Book of Mormon at the finest level of linguistic detail in order to prepare a guide for translators. For my part of the project, I happened to be assigned to work on that part of The Book of Mormon which contained a description and explanation of an unusual device known as “urim and thummim”—something like crystal eye glasses that could be used for discovering knowledge unavailable to normal perception. According to The Book of Mormon, those who could use this device were known as “seers” and with it had the power to translate unknown languages. I reflected on how the present-day leaders of the Church publicly held themselves as “seers,” and that the definition for that term in the Church was this passage in The Book of Mormon. It necessarily followed that our leaders were claiming to have powers that would enable them to translate. Yet when those of us in the translation department would take difficult translation problems to these “seers,” not only did they not evidence any particular power to translate, but their opinions were of no better in quality than those of a naïve person. The best they could offer was not only not helpful to us, but sometimes even retrograde. To me, it seemed like an obvious failure of our inspired leaders in a primary role they at least nominally held for themselves.

The Cracks Widen

While working at Church headquarters I developed some acquaintance with the office that did institutional research. It was the role of that office to use the finest available professional research and evaluation methodologies to develop empirical information to support decision making by Church executives (—an interesting proposition, in light of the belief that the Church is constantly guided by divine inspiration). One large project

performed for the Missionary Department was a study of the conversion process. This was done to provide a basis for the design of a more effective proselyting program. After a long and thorough process, the researchers arrived at a description of the conversion process with a surprising perspective. Though the conclusions were not stated in these terms, what the researchers essentially found was that conversion to the Church could be adequately explained by psycho-social dynamics. Implied in the findings was that there was no necessary place for either theology or “the Spirit” in conversions. It was not a model that supported the view that converts joined the Church for the most part because of compelling spiritual or theological reasons, but rather that they joined because of their desire to identify with the values, ideals, aspirations, and lifestyle that they saw exemplified by its missionaries and members. Though these findings are generalities and may not explain individual cases, they suggested a different perspective on the importance of the social dynamic of conversion than I had previously held and caused me to radically reinterpret my own missionary experience.

The social dynamics of conversion became obvious to me later when I visited the Museum of National History in Stockholm. In the mid 1800’s, it was not uncommon for a Mormon missionary to garner hundreds of converts in Sweden. It was then seen as a miraculous “outpouring of the Spirit” and was a tremendous affirmation to the young church. Nowadays, of course, missionaries there can feel relatively successful if they get one or two converts during their two-year term of service. The museum showed me dramatically how in the 1800’s, rising expectations coupled with severe economic dislocation motivated several hundred thousand Swedes to emigrate to America. Conversion to an idealistic new religion and then “gathering to Zion” conveniently fit within those other, stronger motivations, and made a little wavelet to Utah within that larger tide of emigration.

While I worked at Church headquarters, the Church was coming under increasing attack from its detractors as not being “Christian.” The Church was discomfited by these accusations because its self-image is that it is quintessentially Christian. Still, public perception is important to the Church because it translates into conversions. To better

understand the public perception of the Church, the institutional research department undertook another study. Again, their findings were revealing: If the public knew anything at all about the Church, it was about its eccentricities, but virtually nothing of its Christian belief. Even the fact that the Church had “Jesus Christ” in its formal name did not seem to register on the public. After the enormous effort they thought had been made in taking their message of Christ to the public, Church leaders were dismayed by these findings, and began a concerted campaign to revise its public persona by changing visitor center displays and missionary lessons, rewriting public communications and internal curricula, commissioning new hymns, and subtitling The Book of Mormon “Another Testament of Jesus Christ.” Church authorities began conscientiously and conspicuously to speak more of Christ and less of Joseph Smith. Now, of course, even the Church logo has been redesigned to make “Jesus Christ” salient. All of these actions were of course appropriate, but I could not help wondering why the “divinely-inspired” Church of Jesus Christ could ever have had such a positioning problem in the first place, and why it should take detractors and researchers to bring its central mission to focus.

I once confided some of my reservations about the Church to my bishop, an intelligent and accomplished attorney. Instead of addressing those issues, he merely said, “You think too much.” From that amazing admission, it is only possible to conclude that to be comfortably enfolded, a Mormon must deliberately put disconnects out of mind. For me, that was a wholly unsatisfactory solution, and only served to increase my dissatisfaction.

The Dam Breaks

My interest in NDEs coalesced with an interest I had developed as a graduate student with enhanced learning in altered states of consciousness. As I pursued this interest, one topic led to another, until a whole new world of spiritual awareness came cascading through. Though the arena might be called psychology, parapsychology, mythology, human potential, consciousness, metaphysics, mysticism, Eastern spiritual thought, or

New Thought spirituality, it was all related and all spiritual to me. I approached these arenas with interested but cautious skepticism. While I encountered much that was clearly of no value to me, I also found much of value in many small but precious surprises, such as in the thought of Joseph Campbell, Ernest Holmes, Alan Watts, Deepak Chopra, Tom Brown, Wayne Dyer, Richard Alpert (aka Ram Dass), and Paramhansa Yogananda. Through my reading in these areas and exposure to other people and ideas of a spiritual nature outside the Church, I noticed a new pattern emerging. I found much that was spiritually compelling but lacking from my faith, which faith was supposed to be comprehensive and whole. It was also unsettling to find much in my faith that could not be corroborated anywhere outside the Church. As an indicator of my impending shift, whereas the evaluation criteria I used on these new ideas at first came from my Church belief system, as time went on that shifted to my own, inner, spiritual criteria. They felt better.

Of particular interest was my discovery of many people outside the Church who had exceptional powers, such as healing, effecting other physical change through thought, or extraordinary intuitive knowledge. Of greatest importance to me were those who were offering compelling metaphysical understanding that is dramatically beyond common human understanding—more particularly, Mormon understanding—such as the insights mediated by Helen Schucman (A Course in Miracles), Jane Roberts (“Seth” material), Mary-Margaret Moore (“Bartholomew” material), Pat Rodegast (“Emmanuel” material), Ken Carey (“Starseed” material), Neale Donald Walsch (Conversations with God), and Esther Hicks (“Abraham” material). I had been accustomed to thinking of such powers of “revelation” as belonging only to those who had been formally given the “gift of the Holy Ghost” or who held the “holy priesthood” within the Church. These other gifted people usually did not affiliate with a religious movement. Their powers could be called “spiritual”, “psychic”, or just “intuitive.” In effect, it did not seem to matter. In all, I was finding much more evidence of authentic spiritual value and empowerment outside the Church than within. In contrast, the beliefs and evidences I was getting from the Church seemed frozen in language and custom, less mature, less

valid, less relevant to the living spiritual reality I was experiencing. And frankly, ...even boring.

The Book of Mormon states that God speaks to all people of the world and that His wisdom is written in their books. But ask a Mormon to name just one other book of authentic spiritual wisdom outside the Church and you will inevitably draw a blank. It is as if the total life program of the Church acts as blinders on its members to the rich spiritual life going on all around it. At the same time, it began to seem strange that no one outside the Church put any credibility in The Book of Mormon. The Church's claim to being the torch-bearer of truth began to seem vacuous.

Ultimately the Church should be judged not by its secondary features but by its irreducible essentials. "That-without-which-there-is nothing" for the Church is its claim of priesthood power and authority, and the "Gift of the Holy Ghost." Eventually I had to accept the clear reality before me: There was no significant difference between Mormons who formally had the "Gift of the Holy Ghost" or "the power of the Priesthood", and non-Mormons who did not. Certainly there was ample evidence of spiritual power within the Church, but it was *not distinctive* in contrast to the evidence I was finding elsewhere. I was finding that people of all religious persuasions have the same kind of spiritual experiences that Mormons have, and like Mormons, interpret those experiences in their own terms and take them to validate their own faith. In comparison though, spiritual manifestations in the Church actually seemed rather low-grade, and as often as not, simply lacking. You might hear occasionally of a manifestation of "the power of the Priesthood," but you would certainly not hear of the thousands of other non-manifestations of priesthood power in attempted ministrations or inspired dictums. Such are explained away or conveniently ignored. As the actual presence of a real and distinctive spiritual endowment is the essence of the Church's claim to legitimacy, that legitimacy ceased to exist in my mind. Beliefs I made fit as a true believer no longer fit.

It seemed clear to me that if the “gift” truly existed in the Church, that the rich spiritual insight originally evident would continue to be abundantly evident in the experience of its leaders and members. Instead, whatever well of fresh inspiration there may have been in the Church seems to have gone dry. While spiritual gifts may have been more evident in the early Church, they exist now more in the ideal, or in symbolic vestige. The early spiritual insight and power seems to have turned into formalisms in an arrested state of development. I could no longer “pay no attention to that man behind the curtain.”

The perspective within the Church is that its spiritual life is rich. But the broader perspective I was seeing made the Church’s spiritual life seem shallow and impoverished in comparison. The Church warns its members against going beyond the fundamentals, arresting their development as well. At worst, going beyond is sometimes labeled “of the devil.” Such a last-ditch defense fails me utterly in view of the positive, uplifting and even joyous expansiveness of my new-found spirituality.

Though I had considered dropping out of the Church for many years, the crossover event came one Sunday in 1998 during a weekly men’s meeting. I had been struggling to come to a decision about my position relative to the Church. The lesson for that day was on the Spirit of God. It was an important topic to me. I had thoroughly studied the lesson in advance, and was eager to reach a higher level of understanding about it. I was unusually receptive and attentive during our lesson. The lesson was delivered in accordance with a manual published by the Church, and involved discussion and comment by class members who were well-informed, experienced, and mature. The comments made were similar to what I had heard in life-long attendance at such meetings, and also similar to the comments I myself had made. But in my heightened state of awareness, I was amazed to discover that the system of thought manifest in the lesson manual and the comment from the class was fundamentally that of interdependent non-sequiturs. By the end of the lesson, it was apparent that the framework of belief from which these non-sequiturs sprang would be better called folk wisdom rather than spiritual insight, that there was actually no compelling insight there,

and that such was characteristic of Church teaching in general. Mormon leader, Boyd Packer warned of climbing the ladder of success only to find it leaning against the wrong wall. My wall turned out to be the Church.

It wasn't any longer worth the strain of trying to fit what was being offered by the Church into my rapidly expanding system of spiritual thought. I was not getting value from what was being offered by the Church, nor did I see that the situation could ever change. I left and never went back. Not only have I not missed it, I have felt positively relieved. Later in 2000, it became clear that even formal affiliation was pointless and incongruous, so I withdrew from membership.

It is difficult for the faithful to countenance a repudiation of their faith. One appeal is to our mutual desire for happiness, approximately as follows (with a nod to A-H):

LDS: You must be a faithful member of the Church to be truly happy.

RB: How is it then that many of the faithful are not happy, while many non-Mormons are happy?

LDS: That mystery will all be clear in the hereafter.

RB: All I know is, I've never been happier. So I'll just have to leave you with your mysteries.

A supposedly ultimate charge from Church faithful occasionally levied on the likes of me is of the form, 'But what of your temple covenants?' referring to the promises of loyalty and obedience made by all who have participated in advanced Mormon temple ceremonies, including me. My answer is this: Mormons define the temple covenant as a two-party contract—one party is you and the other is God. Once I found there never was another party to the contract, it became only my own choice at the time. I'll put it as a parable: What think you of a certain man, who after having undertaken a long journey, discovers that he has been traveling in the wrong direction, but nevertheless decides to remain "true and faithful" to his original course?

More difficult to deal with on the personal level was the issue of familial loyalty: Leaving one's tribe is a universal taboo. To this, I can only say that in leaving the Church I am being loyal to our mutual ideal of integrity, which of myself only I can answer for. At the same time, I do remain a member of my family, and still very much do love my family. For my mid-course correction, I recall the passage from Shakespeare's Hamlet that the late Mormon president, David McKay was fond of quoting: "This above all: To thine own self be true." The time had come for me to put being true to myself above all.

Now What?

Since dropping out, with my newly-acquired sense of objectivity about the Church, I have been able to see many more aspects of its belief and life as inconsistent with its claims of legitimacy. To justify my leaving the Church, it has been tempting to catalog those aspects, but I am not interested in taking a position of opposition to the beliefs of anyone. I can remember how off-putting and even impossible to hear that was to me when I was a true-believing member. Ironically, I now find it engaging to list aspects of the Church that I find to be spiritually compelling. There are several. Any balanced assessment of the Church must take them into account, though critical appraisals rarely do.

In its early days, the Church was distinctive within contemporary Christianity for its unorthodox though progressive and uplifting beliefs. In large measure, these beliefs gave compelling impetus to the movement. Those I still resonate with include:

- The underlying spiritual essence in all life and even matter
- The eternalness of life
- Our existence prior to physical life
- The value of every soul

- The positive value of physical existence
- The intimate interaction between our physical and non-physical dimensions
- Spiritual creation as antecedent to physical creation
- That “there is enough and to spare”
- ‘Seek and you will find, ask and it is given’
- Divine attributes as inherent in our nature
- Jesus as a model for connection to Source
- Source energy (“light”) filling the immensity of space, ‘lighting our eyes and our mind’
- The underlying commonality and connectedness of all
- The primacy of revealed knowledge over empiricism and rationality
- The access all have to inspiration
- Respect for individual will as undetermined and free
- The necessity that there be contrast (“opposition”)
- Personal responsibility for one’s life experience
- The attraction of likes
- Unconditional forgiveness and love
- Personal empowerment and entitlement
- Eternal development and expansion (“progression”), even for God
- Joy as our purpose for being

These are very life-affirming, empowering, and spiritually compelling notions, but one does not get them exclusively from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Most of them are common outside the Church in New Thought spirituality, and many of them are well represented in the human potential and consciousness movements. Disappointingly, the Church does not undertake to expand our understanding of these magnificent principles, or take us onward, but instead eddies in a backwater of frozen language and scripted dogma.

It has recently dawned on me that in contrast to the affirmative notions above stands a large body of core Christian doctrine in the Church that cannot be said to have been

teachings of Jesus restored in their pristine state. It is virtually certain that those beliefs did not originate with Jesus, but were superimposed by the early Christian church onto the surviving image of Jesus, and come straight out of paganism. These beliefs were strengthened through early Christian tradition and solidified into dogma by Constantine's Council of Nicea in the year 325. That dogma includes assertions of Jesus as a divinity—the son of a virgin mother and only begotten of God, the intercessor with God and savior of humankind; the eating of his flesh and drinking of his blood as a sacrament, the sacrifice of his life as an appeasement for our sins; and further notions of our guilt, salvation or damnation, sacraments as necessary for our salvation, and the authority of a priesthood (i.e., the Church) over such matters. All this for the greater glory and power of church and State, but not the authentic Jesus. The position that The Book of Mormon is an independent corroboration of Jesus as a divine redeemer fails in that it merely echoes the very paganism enshrined by the Council of Nicea.

There are some distracters who claim that the Church is not Christian. Ironically, what condemns the Church is that it is Christian—that is, it partakes of the fatally flawed, orthodox Christian tradition and fails to deliver the whole, unadulterated truth of Jesus that it claims to have (see <http://robertbushman.info/NT.htm>).

I do however feel a need to be able to account for what the Church actually is—to account for the vitality that is obviously there and not to casually dismiss it. I recognize that to do so in a comprehensive way would take a higher perspective than I now have. It's tempting to be simplistic, but that would not be fair. For the present though, I characterize the beliefs of the Church as nineteenth-century New England folk Christianity, mingled with idealism and flashes of spiritual insight. Whatever his incongruities, Church founder Joseph Smith did offer some authentic spiritual value. The best of his teachings, however, may have been unique in his time and place, but are not unique today, and many of his other offerings are simply unfortunate—some no doubt formed in honest misinterpretation of his experience, with others reflecting the spirit and view of his times, and even including some self-serving fantasy. The

succeeding institution has evolved like many other churches, gradually sliding into formalism.

Though generally well-intentioned, the contemporary Church has compensated for its relative lack of authentic spiritual life by emphasis on behavioral norms and formal orthodoxy. Some would say it's about institutional power, and though that may be, in my mind it does not fairly characterize the life of the Church. In the end, for me personally, the Church essentially fails to offer authentic or compelling spiritual leadership. Its ideals, as represented in its sacraments, remain largely symbolic of high aspiration, with their authenticity supplied by the believer. On the down side, some of its skewed beliefs translate into unfortunate social and personal dysfunction.

I believe that the perceived success of the Church today, taken by its members as validation of its divine source, may be attributed to a relatively coherent presentation of conservative "family values" for those who are uncomfortable with a rapidly evolving social culture, and to the personal empowerment that one may feel when allying with such a formidable organization and its comprehensive plan of life. Much of the staying power of the Church has come from its having created a strong sense of community among its members. The success of its early, arduous trek into the Great American Desert was its Long March that bonded the hearts of its members so strongly that it persists as a cultural backbone even today. Some would emphasize the psychological effects of the systematic private interviews to establish personal orthodoxy, its strongly conformist ethos, the substantial sacrifice of time and money expected from the faithful, and its rituals and repetitions of secret, solemn oaths of loyalty. All these too have no doubt played a large part in what staying power the Church has, though only 20% of those who enter the Church remain in it throughout their lives.

I appreciate the Church for what it has given me, especially the experiences of my missionary service and the caring support of its community. I acknowledge that the Church is vital and fulfilling for many of its members. I am happy to allow them their beliefs as valid for them, as I do for anyone. I admire the Church for the close

community it engenders and the positive wholesomeness it represents. For myself, I can only personally validate what works for me spiritually, and the Church does not.

As for the conviction I once believed I had of the Church's validity, I understand now that it was in part my resonance with the authentic aspects of its beliefs, mixed with idealism and the elation of high aspiration, plus some wishful thinking. I still do hold the conviction that some of the teachings of the Church are inspired. I just no longer believe that the existence of that inspiration translates into the whole of its claims and beliefs as true. The opposite holds as well—that the presence of contradictions in the Church does not mean that there is no value there. The “all-or-nothing” position commonly advanced both by the Church to support it as well as by detractors to attack it, is simply fallacious.

On a metaphysical level of analysis, I speculate that in their conviction, most true-believing Mormons, myself formerly included, have unconsciously tapped into a bank of Mormon memes, thought-forms, or morphic fields, by achieving resonance with them through thought, imagination, belief, faith, and wishful thinking. Like any thought-forms, they are non-physical, exist independently, and have causal potency. The genesis of many of these thought-forms may pre-date Joseph Smith, but Smith altered, supplemented, and strengthened them, creating his own set. Ever since, devout Mormon believers have continued to strengthen that set of thought-forms with their own fervor. Thus, as the Church has grown over the years, the strength of these thought-forms has become very imposing. When one achieves resonance with them, one feels it, and may interpret that feeling as religious experience and spiritual confirmation. But the existence and potency of these thought-forms does mean they are valid constructs. They simply exist and may be sensed on an intuitive level. (For more on this idea, see my paper at http://robertbushman.info/First_Vision.htm.)

“Oh, Say What is Truth”

Since leaving the Church, I have been puzzled that my many Mormon friends have not shown interest in engaging with me over the reasons for my disaffection. Arguing such

points does not interest them nor me, but the elephant in the room is hard to ignore. There seems to be a great communication chasm that separates us. For the believer, the Church is “true” by definition, and therefore any other possibility simply does not exist, so dialog on that topic is a non-starter. There seems to be no interest in “suspending disbelief” in order to examine other possibilities. Perhaps such a suspension would be too threatening to the believer. Perhaps the believer is uncomfortable facing someone whose mere presence is a repudiation of their faith. Unfortunately, even in science, it is very difficult for those with a major personal investment in a belief system to dispassionately examine whatever is outside that belief.

Institutionally, the Church does not attempt to bridge the communication chasm. Its authorities do not field questions in public forums; they avoid discussions of Church doctrine and history, and even discourage participation in open forums of examination of Mormon thought, such as are sponsored by unofficial Mormon-interest publications, Sunstone and Dialog. Though I am disappointed by this lack of fearless engagement, I take it as yet another evidence of an insecure position.

Ironically, the Church proclaims itself to embrace all truth. The believers may sing “Oh, say what is truth...” but truth for them is whatever fits their belief. What does not fit is spun or ignored. Belief trumps evidence. Obviously, “truth” is LDS new-speak. To my mind, Mormon preoccupation with its truthfulness belies an underlying insecurity with its truthfulness.

My New Life

As my understanding of the nature of religious belief and conviction has matured, it has slowly dawned on me that it is our general human tendency to unconsciously manifest validation of our beliefs, whatever they may be. Not only do we tend to perceive what validates our belief and not perceive what invalidates it, we positively attract validation into our experience. Though there is obviously a commonality to human experience, we also all have our own “truth” that is personal to our own unique experience. This is

how Mormons, Baptists, Catholics, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Taoists, animists, and atheists alike can all say with confidence that their beliefs are experientially valid.

Our self-validating nature and our desire for validation, makes it tricky to get outside our box and learn something truly new—to shift up into a more comprehensive paradigm. That nature is what held me back for so long. It was a belief trap, ...a hall of mirrors, ...a self-licking ice cream cone. But it's not an impossible situation to transcend. The awareness of this trap is in itself empowering. And somehow in its transcendence I sense the ineffable. The exhilaration of a peek out the box is unmistakable. And what I sense as I peer out of my box is an intimate connection with all that is—a non-dualism that comprehends all my dear Mormon friends and their ideals, and far beyond.

The Church had taught me to think of myself as something of an elitist in the sense that I possessed many special distinctions others did not have—revealed truth, inspired leadership, the priesthood, the “temple endowment,” and “sealing” in an eternal family relationship. I was said to be one of a “peculiar people” “set apart from the world.” Although this mindset was calculated to empower me, and did in many ways, the downside was that it led me to develop an attitude of separation from non-Mormons that did not serve me well. Now that I have left the Church, I feel as if I am finally joining the human race and opening to a productive, co-creative connection with others in ways that did not seem possible before.

There is the odd perception in the Church that if you leave it, you will lose your moral compass, as if one needed the institution for moral guidance. My actual experience has been nothing of the kind. Not only have my ethics remained intact, they are now more secure because they derive from my connection to Source instead of institutional or behavioral norms. The perception too is that leaving the Church amounts to a major failure of faith. My experience is that it has been one of my finest spiritual accomplishments.

My departure from the Church has been a major life change—as a friend put it, like a sex-change operation. But my sense is that I have managed an astounding feat: I have escaped the grip of an all-pervasive mind set as if I had escaped from a high-security prison. And I seemingly did it on my own: There was no one leading me—no one cheering from the sidelines, and at the risk of alienation from those close to me. Though there is little external validation of the break-through, there is the clear sense that I have done something of remarkable significance. I have set out into a brave, new world, leaving behind the comfort of the supporting beliefs of the imposing institution and community of the Church—of my many dear friends and family. It is at once intimidating and exhilarating. While I wish my many Mormon friends the very best on their path, I am firmly on my own spiritual path now, no longer as a co-dependent child, but responsible for my own beliefs. Even in the vulnerability of that independence, I sense an empowerment of spirit—the overwhelming support of what I now recognize and gratefully appreciate as a benevolent universe.

I eagerly anticipate much learning and change ahead: to take full responsibility for my experience, to not confuse religion for spirituality, to not substitute belief for being, to claim the validity of my own interests, to find security in my underlying wholeness, to be congruent with the highest in me, to express from my authenticity, to allow others even in their disallowance of me, to savor the enrichment of diversity, to open to expansion, and not least, to fully enjoy the exquisite adventure of life.

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Your e-mailed responses are welcome to RobertBushman (at) comcast dot net
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