

A Journey with Doubt

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AN UNWAVERING TESTIMONY of the unique and utter truthfulness of the Church is a prized possession among Mormons. I often hear members declare in testimony meetings that they have “always known the Church is true.” Lately, I’ve found myself wondering if their “knowing” (if too easily won) might be cheating them out of some valuable insights and opportunities for personal growth.

Doubts and the pain of such doubting have a way of shaking apart comfortable old habits and ideas and forcing the sometimes arduous, but ultimately rewarding, task of rebuilding. My own painful struggles with doubt and uncertainty have necessitated a rebuilding that has given me insights and understanding that I could probably have gained in no other way.

My struggles with doubt began one Saturday afternoon about four years ago. I was standing in line at the public library when it occurred to me that I’d neglected to select something for Sunday reading. Deserting what had finally become a favored position near the check-out desk, I proceeded to the LDS book section and began searching. After a few minutes I noticed (as I had on other occasions) a lime-colored volume entitled *No Man Knows My History* by Fawn M. Brodie. I felt impressed to check it out.

The days that followed found me curled up at various favorite reading spots around the house, both shocked and fascinated with the things I was reading about Joseph Smith and early Church history. “Can this really be true?” I kept asking myself. Had the prophet actually sought out married women for his polygamous relationships? Did he hide some of his marriages from Emma? My head was swimming with new terms like peepstone, necromancer, and money digger. I read disturbing allegations concerning Danites, masonic rituals, and Egyptian papyri.

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I had heard of other people reading and dismissing Brodie's book with ease — just as I'd hoped to do. By the time I had finished my reading, however, I no longer "knew" that the Church was true, nor was I certain that Joseph Smith was a true prophet. I was troubled by doubts, confusion, and anger. I needed to compare what I had read with what others had written. I began with a book by Fanny Stenhouse entitled *Tell It All*. I was very moved by the experiences she related concerning the effects of polygamy upon her life and the lives of her friends. I continued reading other books and articles considered anti-Mormon, including a large volume by Jerald Tanner.

I next turned my attention to non-Mormon authors with reputations for a little more objectivity. Their writings, though much more even in tone, did little to ease my growing concerns about early Church history. I avoided most Mormon authors at this time, not wanting to be reminded of all the positive and uplifting aspects of Church history. I didn't care, at this point, what good and miraculous things had occurred. I needed to deal with a growing list of questions and inconsistencies.

The whole situation seemed ironic and unfair. Hadn't the Church always taught that it was important to gain knowledge? Was it wrong of me to have read what I did? Was I so lacking in intelligence and spirituality that I had allowed myself to be deceived by the adversary? I prayed often, but to no avail. I wanted immediate confirmation that the Church was true. Struggling with my doubts made me feel guilty and alienated from those I loved.

Two images come immediately to mind when I think of that first year of struggle. Most painful, I see myself lying in bed on any given Sunday — covers up to my chin, make-up from church still in place, trying to avert a headache by shutting out the world. Sundays became dreadful reminders of what I had lost.

Sometimes my very patient and very believing husband would venture into our darkened bedroom and sit in a chair at the foot of the bed. This was all the invitation I usually needed to launch into a monologue of whatever painful feelings I was experiencing at that particular moment. He was always sympathetic and loving. And at the times when tears made words impossible, he crawled into bed with me, held me close, and told me that he loved me.

The second image of that difficult time is very different. As I read more and more about the early Church and its leaders (often from sources less than sympathetic), my anger and disillusionment gave way to a wry sort of amusement, something a more pious individual might have mistaken for devilish glee. At these times, I would regale my poor husband with all sorts of stories about the early Church. I had a special fondness for anything relating to polygamy or the faults and foibles of the prophets or other brethren that my early Church teachers had taught me to revere. My husband suffered through these tales with amazing good humor and patience. "Well, the prophets were human, too," he must have said over a hundred times. At other times, he questioned the motives or qualifications of the authors I had read.

It was therapeutic having someone to bounce my new-found knowledge off of, but it was also aggravating. I couldn't understand how my husband

could listen so dispassionately to the unsettling things which were threatening to destroy my testimony. Absolutely nothing I said shook his faith. I came to resent his unflappable attitude and for a time accused him of being like the religious fanatics described by Eric Hoffer in his book *The True Believer*. Like them, he seemed to possess the uncanny ability to disregard unpleasant facts as just so much “fluff.” I wanted the ugly little inconsistencies to gnaw on *his* brain for a while. He was so immune. I was so vulnerable. His tolerance and sympathy for my disillusionment often seemed poor substitutes for real understanding.

That first year I felt like I was on a roller coaster. My feelings swung from abject humility to raging conceit. One minute I would want to get out of the Church because I felt smothered with hypocrisy — my own. The next minute I would pat myself on the back for having the courage to maintain my membership and activity for the sake of my husband and children. Was I a martyr for my family or a slave to an outgrown faith?

During that year I was called to a leadership position in our ward. I turned it down, explaining that my recent intensive reading of uncensored Church history had changed my perspective on the Church. This confession precipitated a series of appointments with my bishop.

During our first session, the bishop let me rattle on about my disillusionment since my forays into “forbidden literature.” I explained that I had read several books written by non-Mormon authors — some antagonistic, others apparently objective. I told him of my careful efforts to sift truth from fiction. And I explained that the overall effect of my reading (yes, I had read Hugh Nibley’s *No Ma’am That’s Not History*) was still disillusionment.

I assured him that I was continuing to pray daily and pay a full tithing, had no immediate plans to beat my children, cheat on my husband, break the Word of Wisdom, join an apostate group, or in any other way change my current lifestyle. I told him that I was reading in an effort to find the “deeper knowledge” that I had heard would bring me back to the faith I had once known. I explained that much of my current reading was not directly concerned with Mormonism but dealt with other Christian faiths and major world religions.

After I wound down a bit, the bishop fixed his dark eyes on my face and observed (accurately, I might add, though it seemed strange considering the context of our discussion), “one does not have to commit adultery to know it is wrong.” He compared the books I had been reading to pornography. I felt angry and misunderstood but held my tongue, knowing it would accomplish nothing to lash out at him in anger.

Later at home, however, I kept thinking back on the interview, and the more I thought about it, the more upset I became. I decided to write him a letter, which said in part:

Sunday, you mentioned that one does not have to commit adultery to know that it is wrong. (I hope that you don’t equate learning about other faiths with immorality.) You also compared, or so it seemed to me, the writings of non-Mormons to pornography. These comments could lead me to believe that you see me as a some-

what unsavory person (a peeping Thomasina?) looking under the skirts of our established Church and its iron-clad beliefs. If so, I hope you'll reconsider. I'm merely searching for the truth, and isn't that what life is all about?

Before giving the letter to the bishop, I made a copy of it for myself. I'd discovered that reading it helped me; I had been able to stand up for myself in the letter in a way that I seldom did in my own mind. I also wanted to hang onto a replica of my carefully chosen words in case I later decided to berate myself for them. I didn't want to suffer for anything that I'd only *thought* of writing.

The bishop reacted very kindly to the letter, and I sensed that he really wanted to help me with my problem. We talked on several occasions about early Church history, but since he knew very little of a controversial nature concerning the Church, we just didn't get any where. He couldn't relate to what I was going through. Even so, he took the time to listen, and I'll always respect him for that.

In time my anxiety and need for emphatic answers began to fade. (I decided that if there were any emphatic answers to be had, I was apparently not ready for them.) I continued to read and made the happy discovery that my doubts had created a new interest in all sorts of people and subjects. In addition to books on Mormonism, I read books by Catholic theologians, Methodist ministers, and Baptist missionaries. I developed an ongoing interest in the religions of the world, especially Judaism.

Sundays continued to be difficult, but I no longer hid in bed with tears or headaches. Church became an opportunity to develop a thicker skin and tolerance for views different from my own. My new tolerance was severely tried the day a member of our stake presidency spoke about how it was far easier for a person to come back into the Church after having committed adultery, or almost any other type of sin, than it was for those who had simply lost faith. He went on authoritatively at some length about the dangers of losing faith, implying that doubting was more abhorrent in the eyes of God than immorality.

Perhaps it would be easier for me to look at doubt as a vice if it were an avenue I had consciously chosen. However, my explorations of early Church history were initiated by what I considered to be a spiritual prompting. After reading Brodie's book and in the agonizing months that followed, I would often lament to my husband that I had been born without an instinct for self-preservation. Maybe I should have fasted and prayed after reading Brodie's book instead of seeking answers, on my own, through additional reading. After all, what other Mormon would be foolhardy enough to read the things I'd read? I found out later (through *Sunstone* and *DIALOGUE*) that there are many such "foolhardy" Mormons. Their insights helped me accept (and even indulge) my unconventional curiosity and strengthened my desire to stay active in the Church.

Over time, I realized that my doubts had forced me to discover a God very different from the one I had known as a child. Despite the Church's teachings

of a loving deity, my earliest impressions of God were distorted by fear — a fear that seems almost to have been inborn. My mother tells me that when sweet Sister Cook, the neighborhood “grandma,” used to stop at our house to visit, I’d run and hide under the kitchen table. As an older child I was absolutely terrified of barking dogs, car rides past bodies of water of any sort, and any and every disease that came to my horrified attention.

I suppose it was only natural that a child so full of fears would also come to fear God. I saw him as some sort of cosmic mind reader who knew and judged my every thought. I felt very uncomfortable in Primary reciting the phrase, “My Heavenly Father loves me,” because I felt that he certainly couldn’t love *me*. And, of course, I didn’t want him to think I was proud enough or silly enough to think he did.

My fears followed me into adolescence. I attended a multitude of church meetings and seminary classes where, among other things, I discovered new and exotic things to worry about. I was always trying to be worthy of guidance and inspiration because I desperately wanted to make all the right choices. I spent most of my Sundays “holed up” in my room reading scriptures or agonizing over my shortcomings.

At about this time I began to imagine that many (far too many) of my everyday actions were being inspired and directed by God: “You’d better get up now.” “You should have finished that assignment last night.” “You’re going to miss the bus.” “You need to work on such and such.” Fortunately, I never felt “inspired” to do anything very out of the ordinary. It took me several years, however, and the security of a good marriage to finally recognize that most of my “inspirations” were simply desperate attempts to avoid responsibility for my own imperfect actions, coupled with a frantic need to feel loved and accepted by God.

As might be imagined, a person so obsessed with her own righteousness would find it difficult to accept other’s imperfections — especially if those others claimed to be men and women of God. When I was unable, through my reading, to satisfactorily refute many of the things I’d read critical to the Church, my belief structure literally crumbled, and I was forced to rebuild from the ground up.

One of the first things I did was brash for a person with my background. I decided to give up the impossible-to-please God of my childhood and briefly considered becoming an atheist. I read about and sympathized with those who claim there is no God and have yet been able to show, through unselfish acts of compassion, more honest love for humanity than many self-proclaimed believers who sometimes appear incapable of really seeing those outside their own religious circles — except, perhaps, as potential converts. I also admired the way many of the atheists I read about did their good works unmotivated by hope for heavenly compensation. My fascination with atheism ended, however, when I realized how much I wanted and needed God in my life — not the harsh, punishing God of my childhood, but a loving, caring father who could tolerate imperfection. I began searching for such a God. I began praying to such a God.