

From Here to Eternity?

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MY MARRIAGE IN 1968 to a man who was not a member of the Church has been instrumental to my growth and development not only as a person but also as a Latter-day Saint. In my husband Rudi, a totally non-religious individual, I found a sensitivity to human needs (particularly those of women), a tolerance for others' views, and a political and social awareness which I felt should be the hallmark of God's church but which seemed sorely wanting in the Mormonism of my experience. Although I knew I would be living in a home without the priesthood, that did not seem like a particular drawback when weighed against the nurturing atmosphere for self-realization, including the freedom to practice *and* question my beliefs.

During the years when I struggled actively with the question of what I believed, the period of my life that I refer to as my reconversion, Rudi was often the only person with whom I could discuss my concerns and doubts. Although he had no frame of reference for some of my most burning questions, for example, the divinity of Joseph Smith's role in the restoration, his open-mindedness and thoughtfulness often lent insight to my searching. Above all, I could safely speak in his presence some of the rather scary thoughts I had about the Prophet, polygamy, and non-universal priesthood. I question what kind of progress I would have made had I been married to a Church member at that time. Rudi was in no way threatened by my belief-related turmoil, nor was our marriage affected by my activity status. Had my husband been LDS, on the other hand, my turmoil could have been extremely threatening to my marriage. I would have hesitated to express some of my dark thoughts, fearing to lose my mate's love or shake his testimony. In my marriage to a nonmember, however, sharing my personal concerns fostered trust, respect, and intimacy, not jeopardy.

During this stage of my life, *Dialogue* and *Sunstone* were of critical importance to me. Contrary to popular opinion, they did not drive me from the Church but rather were my lifeline to membership as I struggled to grow in gospel understanding. I was comforted and encouraged to discover that others had reconciled questioning and a deep commitment to the faith. Reading these journals might have created friction in

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an LDS marriage; Rudi, however, not only approved but also actively supported the concept of scholarly dialogue.

Twenty years ago Latter-day Saints did not accept women's expanded role in society as readily as they do today. When my first marriage ended in divorce, I was determined to complete my education. Though I was already equipped to earn an adequate living, I was interested in more than simply earning a living and biding my time until some man might again rescue me from singleness. I wanted professional credibility and the option of a lifetime career, irrespective of marital status. I was not surrounded by role models for these aspirations at church, but I did find complete sympathy for my attitudes in Rudi. Years before I ever heard the Young Women admonished to prepare for their own economic well-being, Rudi advocated that very preparedness as being essential to women's emotional and financial security. He was an understanding, enthusiastic supporter of my lengthy and sometimes tortuous graduate years. After our marriage and while I was engrossed in my doctoral studies, we built an independent analytical testing laboratory into a thriving business. Rudi admired the business skills and professional expertise that I acquired seat-of-the-pants style. His affirmation of my need for fulfillment outside the home was liberating in comparison with the restrictive attitudes for women then prevalent within the Church.

Being married to a nonmember offered me church-related benefits as well. A case in point has to do with church service. Church service is so integral to our belief that many of us have difficulty refusing any church-related request. It is much easier for someone married to a nonmember to say no, both for the person saying it and for the one whose request is denied. I increasingly need to weigh carefully the consequences of additional responsibility upon my relationship with my husband and family. When I decline to serve on yet one more committee, I meet with immediate acceptance of my refusal if I point out consideration for my husband's needs. In contrast, even in situations where it would be appropriate to say no if your spouse was a member, individuals in a Mormon marriage often feel they can't refuse. A refusal might be read as weak faith by either their spouse or the person they refused. I enjoy a respect for good judgment of personal circumstances that ought to be accorded every Latter-day Saint.

One distinct advantage of marriage to a nonmember who is not also a member of another church is we do not need to negotiate about which church's social activities we will attend. We did, however, need to negotiate the religious training of our child. The birth of our son provided a powerful incentive for me to resolve my religious dilemmas. I

resumed regular church attendance and scripture study, feeling it essential that I have a clear fix on what I wanted to teach him about God if he were to be a whole, healthy person. Eventually I was called to be a Primary teacher. I will be grateful always for those years in the Primary; they gave me a precious experience with my child, taught me about children in general, and provided the forum in which I relearned and reaccepted the gospel fundamentals. When our son was five years old, our wise bishop pointed out to me that the purpose of Primary is to prepare children for baptism. He urged me to make that clear to Rudi immediately to avoid sudden misunderstanding when Carlo's baptism approached. Although Rudi heartily endorsed Carlo's attendance and participation in all the Church activities, he initially had deep reservations about heading Carlo toward baptism. He felt that eight was too early an age to make such a commitment. He had envisioned that Carlo would be raised in the Church atmosphere but would remain free of commitment until he was older. Our discussions convinced him that it would be hard for Carlo to be actively involved, especially as a teenager, without belonging. He also realized that at this stage of Carlo's life, this was something he truly desired to do. My willingness to allow Carlo the freedom to rethink the matter of his belief, should he so desire as he became older, was essential to Rudi's willingness to permit him to proceed toward baptism now. It was also established that I would never require Carlo to serve a mission and that Rudi would not deny him the right to do so; it would be Carlo's choice at the appropriate time. Having witnessed my own lengthy grappling with Mormonism, Rudi was reassured that I would grant Carlo freedom and support for possible future redefinition of his belief.

I see the potential for negative consequences to a child raised in such an environment and to the entire family. Fortunately these have not been our lot. A child could conceivably become confused and feel conflict because of a parent's nonbelief, thus weakening their relationship. A child's desire to miss church meetings for any reason could become an arena for family conflict. Lack of unity in parental belief could lead to a child's indifference or sense of diminished importance to the practice of religion. Other negative outcomes are no doubt possible. For our family, however, the situation has fostered tolerance and deep respect for agency. Carlo learned tolerance at an early age for the right to believe differently or not at all. He is keenly aware of the right and responsibility he has in both the choice and practice of belief. He is sensitive to the fact that good people exist in other religions and without formal religious affiliation. He has discovered that not all spiritual people are counted among the Latter-day Saints. There is added incen-

tive in an interfaith marriage for parents to practice the kind of tolerant acceptance of others that should be a universal ideal.

Religious differences in a family affect far more than the children's education in the faith. In fact, divergent religious attitudes can become the whipping boy for every marital problem. An apparent case of a spouse who cares more for the needs and wants of the ward than those of his or her partner may upon closer examination prove to be a case of using religious commitments to avoid dealing with painful or time-consuming human relationships at home. The quick fix of appreciation for service to others, of doing "God's will," may be irresistible compared to the slow process of deciphering your spouse's emotional semaphores. All that the nonmember spouse sees is that the Church comes before everything else. Indeed, religious differences can so effectively camouflage the basic issues that they are never addressed. Rudi and I have not escaped this problem entirely, but an enhanced awareness of my tendency to fall into this trap helps me remain vigilant to avoid it.

With the maturation of my belief has come a desire to push beyond the intellect toward greater spirituality. This promises to be a quest as arduous as the one that brought me this far. Intellectual pursuits figure largely in my efforts thus far. Reading, study, and discussion expand my knowledge and understanding. Words are vital to this process obviously. Spirituality, however, seems to transcend words.

As I seek to more fully open myself to this enticing, elusive dimension beyond the realm of words, I do not draw the same comfort from my relationship with Rudi that I did during my earlier struggles. His need for spiritual experiences is far more limited than mine. We share a love of music, art, theater, and nature, all of which offer spiritual encounters, but we are not able to share the spiritual insights which come through prayer, fasting, church meetings, temple-going, and other church-related activities. Neither do we enjoy the closeness that develops when problems between a couple or within the family are approached through united prayer. All of this is at the expense of intimacy between us. We are presently seeking ways to overcome this loss of intimacy while preserving our individual differences. It will be interesting to see how we resolve this. Even recognizing the problem has not been easy. That we have diagnosed the situation, however, encourages me that the essential strength of our peculiar interfaith pairing is intact, and that we will break new ground in our marriage.

It should be apparent, then, that on balance I consider that my marriage to a nonmember has been more than adequate for time. But what about eternity? Eternity was not an overriding issue when I decided to marry a second time. I cannot claim, as some Latter-day Saints do, per-