

Belonging

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I AM PART OF THE USUAL Gospel Doctrine “crowd,” and although I’m not one of those folks who can sleep upright in a metal chair, I have refrained from being an active participant in the class. I keep my hand down: I don’t call out or volunteer for anything, not even a prayer. It isn’t that I’m not paying attention (though God knows paying attention can be difficult). Rather it is because I am a new member of the ward and I’d like to make friends.

Today’s discussion is towering over me with a mallet as though to say, “Speak once, and it’s all over for you. You’ll always be lonely in this ward.”

The teacher has read Doctrine and Covenants 1:38: “What I the Lord have spoken, I have spoken, and I excuse not myself; and though the heavens and the earth pass away, my word shall not pass away, but shall all be fulfilled, whether by mine own voice or by the voice of my servants, it is the same.” He repeats the last two phrases for effect.

A hand shoots up, and the instructor calls on his wife. She says, “It’s always struck me as funny that members think they can pick and choose from what the prophet says. When the prophet speaks, he is talking directly to us, to me and to you. We’d better do what he says.” There is nervous laughter, but I don’t laugh. I sense what is about to happen. This topic had gotten me in trouble in my previous ward, the one I can no longer bear to attend.

“But it’s more than that,” the woman beside her adds.

Keep your head down! I tell myself, sensing that the first dangerous extrapolation is about to fly about the room.

“It’s our bishop, too.”

Hey, I know that woman. She had been the stake Young Women’s president in my former stake.

“The bishop’s one of the Lord’s servants,” she says with eyes wide enough to indicate a thyroid problem. “Going against a bishop’s counsel or turning down a calling is no different than saying no to Heavenly Father. Who would want to do that?”

I feel my hand start to rise, but I overpower it with sheer grit.

The instructor bobs his head, obviously relieved that the class is in the throes of a discussion instead of staring straight ahead like a herd of overfed cattle. I'm wondering if this good sister is visiting or has moved to this, my new stake.

"Don't forget the church magazines," someone else adds. I sink in my chair.

"That's right," the former Stake YW President inserts. "The magazines are filled with the word of God. What's printed in them is exactly what Salt Lake wants us to read that month."

(Since when has a lake cared what I read?)

"And not just the *Ensign*, but the *Friend* and *New Era*, too," tosses in the instructor's wife.

For a flickering moment, I wonder if this attitude about what appears in church magazines is prevalent in this ward. If it is, I'm in luck. After all, I've been published in them: they have to like me for that, don't they? Does that make my words prophetic too? Maybe they should listen to me for a change. I shudder and let this twisted thought slip from me as I exhale. Wasn't I listening? Didn't I hear that woman say that once a story appears in a bonafide LDS magazine the words cease to belong to the writer and become God's instead? I heighten my resolve to say nothing today, reminding myself that silence is my best chance, and keep staring blankly at the wall.

Of course just because I'm staring blankly doesn't mean the light isn't on in my attic. I'm thinking, "Everyone in this room considers him or herself to be one of God's servants. Every one of us can be moved upon by the Holy Ghost to speak the Lord's mind, and when we do, it is the same as if he were speaking. But (and here I go again) since when does this mean that everything a servant says in all situations is exactly what the Lord would say? That seems mighty presumptuous. Can't such a presumption slide us quickly into blasphemy? Why are we leaving the gift of the Holy Ghost out of the equation? What are we afraid of?"

What am I afraid of? My hand trembles. *No, no, no!* My lips part. *Keep your mouth shut, Lisa. You're intellectualizing again.*

That intellectualizing is taboo in a Sabbath meeting was literally the first thing I learned in Relief Society. I was a brand-spanking new high school graduate and still wet behind the ears from my baptism the year before. Unlike my fellow Laurels, who had been raised in the church, I had disliked the Young Women's program and looked forward to moving into the adult circle of the church. I loved the gospel with its ideas of perpetual learning and growth. But I felt stunted by YW lessons about covering my midriff and keeping my feet on the floor and my lips closed when I dated. I wanted the sort of gospel meat which the adult classes would surely provide. I've always been imaginative.

It was with this naiveté that I attended my first Relief Society meeting, enthusiastically anticipating a “deep” discussion. I don’t remember the subject of the lesson, but I recall being profoundly disappointed and thinking that I was being fed the same fluff as before, but now from a parent’s perspective. Finally a sister several chairs down from where I sat raised her hand and posed a rhetorical question that bespoke genuine reflection. My pulse quickened and I leaned forward, wanting to see the woman who had taken the lesson in a meaningful direction. Her single question told me that certainly she was the ideal LDS woman. In an instant she had become my hero.

The motherly sister sitting beside me misinterpreted my increased interest as concern. Putting a hand on my knee, she whispered (and I quote her precisely), “Don’t pay any attention to her. She intellectualizes everything.”

Just as quickly as my neighbor dismissed my hero’s question, so did the teacher. I sat back in my chair. And I felt hollow for the first—but not the last—time at a church meeting. I thought Mormons were supposed to be intellectual. I thought they valued education. I knew that they taught that “the glory of God is intelligence.” But I learned quickly that popular LDS people keep their minds tucked safely between the fold in their temple recommends.

But back to today’s lesson. My former stake YW president adds, “We can’t forget home teachers. They have the authority to receive revelation for us.” She perks up with a new idea, “Even Sunday School teachers. You’ve been called to teach us, so . . .”

She leaves us hanging. I wonder why she doesn’t mention husbands, the patriarchs of our homes. But then, I know something of her husband and why she divorced him. It was a good move.

Finally a male voice (belonging to a former bishop) chimes in, “Brother (Typical Instructor), where was that lesson manual printed?”

“Why, in Salt Lake.”

“Sure,” the former bishop continues, “so this lesson is exactly what the prophet wants us to hear today and you’re called to teach it. It’s as if God were speaking directly to us. It’s no different.”

And as today’s Gospel Doctrine discussion rotates lazily around the concept of unquestioning obedience, I play a lonely game of tug o’war with my memories. If I were to share an experience from my personal file with these people, would it be received with some empathy or perceived as sin? You tell me:

I was twenty-four, and it was the night before my marriage in the Los Angeles Temple. The telephone rang. My mother, a non-Mormon, answered.

“It’s your bishop,” Mom said and walked from the room, the re-

ceiver left on the kitchen counter like a bone for a dog. My family life was filled with tension, thanks to my choice of a temple marriage, and I desperately needed to hear my bishop commend me for my decision. I wanted someone to tell me he was proud of me when my parents felt only shame and embarrassment at being willfully omitted from their only daughter's wedding ceremony.

I greeted him happily and he returned the tone, but the pleasantries broke apart almost immediately. He said, "I called to tell you that I've prayed and the Lord wants me to be at your sealing tomorrow."

My heart went numb. For years I had worried about how my parents would react to my choice of a temple marriage and pondered how I ought to handle the situation when it arose. Then one day I found myself outside the temple doors waiting for my best friend to emerge after her sealing. Standing beside me was the bride's father, an "unworthy" man of many years. As the guests at the sealing poured out, many of them shook his hand as though they knew him and said things like, "It was a beautiful ceremony. Tammie was radiant." As each of these people pressed on, small suitcase in hand, Tammie's father would lean toward me and ask, "Who was that?"

The bishop. The stake president. I don't know. Our former Laurel advisor. A returned missionary from the singles ward. The second counselor's wife.

I might as well have spoken a clearer truth: To you, they are strangers.

From this experience I knew through both common sense and the Holy Spirit that I was not to allow my parents to hear strangers tell them about their daughter's wedding. My sealing would be private: myself, my fiancé, and our witnesses. That was it. The reception would be public and would show no favoritism by including some family members and friends and excluding others. That was the scenario I discussed with the bishop of my singles ward the day he signed my recommend for the sealing. He commended me for my sensitivity to my parents' feelings and said that of course he understood why he was politely and respectfully not invited to my sealing ceremony.

But now on the phone, just hours before our sealing was to take place, he was singing a different tune. "I need to know what time to be there."

I felt confused. Didn't he remember our discussion? (How could he have forgotten?)

"I thought you understood why I'm not inviting anyone to the temple."

"But I'm your bishop."

I swallowed. Years of lessons about being subject to my bishop's counsel zig-zagged through my mind, but racing in my soul was the

knowledge that he was one of the “strangers” that should not be present on this occasion. I said, “And they are my parents. How can I allow you to see what they cannot?”

I wanted him to give me a logical or spiritually persuasive reason so that I could comfortably combine his request with what I knew the Spirit had both whispered and shouted to me as I wrestled with this decision.

Instead he said (and I am quoting to the best of my ability), “Lisa, your relationship with me is more important than with your parents.” Dumbfounded by this statement, I listened mutely as he proceeded to explain that, since my parents were not members of the church, they would not be worthy to receive the highest degree of glory; our family would be separated in the hereafter. But he and I were living worthily and would go to the celestial kingdom. Therefore, my relationship with him was of an eternal nature, whereas my relationship with my parents was essentially damned.

It was unfathomable that he was saying things which were so ridiculous and had no doctrinal basis. He was supposed to be congratulating me. “I’m sorry,” I said, “But I can’t invite you.” I sounded mousy and my voice shook, but still I said it. “I thought you understood.”

His reply? “I already called the temple. Your sealing is at nine a.m. I’ll see you there.”

“I can’t allow that, Bishop. Please.”

“Lisa, it’s becoming apparent to me that you don’t understand the temple. If you did, you’d ask your bishop to attend.” (Was he crying?) “I’ve never missed a sealing of any one of my kids.” (By this I understood him to mean the members of the singles ward.) I genuinely felt sorry for the man, but I knew what I had to do. I knew what was right for my family. As difficult as it was and as unnatural as it felt, I had to go directly against my bishop’s counsel in order to follow the Spirit because my own best interest and the best interest of my family were at stake.

“I can’t invite you. You cannot come.”

He took a deep, sad breath. “I’m sorry to hear you say that. You leave me no choice. I’ll be at the temple in the morning,” he said, “and if you try to keep me out of the sealing room, I’ll tell the temple president that I’m your bishop and that it is my opinion you don’t understand what you’re doing, that you aren’t spiritually prepared. Your recommend will be revoked and you will not be married.”

“Bishop!”

Click.

“Lisa,” he continued—*What was the click if he hadn’t hung up*—“I just want to see you get married.”

I felt sick. . . .

“I love you. It’s Heavenly Father’s will I attend. Be obedient. I’m your bishop.”

That click had to have been my mother hanging up an extension! She had eavesdropped, heard every word of this rancid conversation. There would be hell to pay. Now she would think she had seen the true nature of the Mormons. She'd been far from enthusiastic about my conversion. Because I had been underage, she and my father had made me wait three years for baptism. Still, we had overcome many of our difficulties, and though she was miserable over my temple marriage before the phone call, she had accepted my decision, if not embraced it. She'd paid for the dress, the invitations, the band, the reception hall, the food, etc, etc. We had both come to see my temple marriage as a large bump in the road of our relationship, but not a wall. What would happen now?

"You," the bishop said, "you're like my own kids."

"I'm sorry, bishop. Good night."

I hear the Gospel Doctrine instructor as he continues with his lesson. "What an amazing blessing it is to know that if we just do what our leaders counsel us, we'll be okay."

Today my mind is like a top, and the instructor's words like the string that sends me spinning back through time. Suddenly I am in another long-ago Gospel Doctrine class in another ward. The same scripture has been read and the same extrapolations made. But I was braver then. I hear myself say, "Bishops are human. They can make mistakes. I think our emphasis should be on obedience to God the Father through the Holy Spirit, not on obedience to our priesthood leaders."

I would have added that obedience to the Holy Spirit and to the counsel of those in authority are usually the same thing; I would have continued by pointing out that the gift of the Holy Ghost is designed to help us recognize truth and we should trust it, but a voice from the front of the room had struck like lightening, saying, "But the Lord has said he'll bless us for obedience. If we do what our priesthood leaders tell us, even if they do make some sort of mistake (which I'm not saying they will), we'll be blessed because the Lord won't hold their mistakes against us."

I cringe as I recall this, partly because I find this sentiment blasphemous and partly because I ironically find myself somehow envying the simplistic world in which people who believe such things live. To think that God would bless us for doing what is wrong!

So I pose the question: Would I have been better off or received more blessings if I had disobeyed the prompting of the Spirit, gone against my love and concern for my parents, and obeyed my bishop? The answer lay in the subsequent events.

As it turned out (and I don't know what happened to make this so), my bishop did not show up at the temple or at my reception. Still the

memory of his phone call clung to my day like something that belongs in a compost heap. To say I was anxious would be an understatement. In the morning my parents hardly spoke a word to me as I prepared to go to the temple. My mother couldn't even look at me as she endured the pain of knowing that her daughter had chosen to marry in a church that not only considered her unworthy to so much as watch her own daughter's marriage ceremony, but that taught her that she and my father were less important in my life than the insensitive and manipulative man—a bishop!)—who had called the night before.

Out of love for me, my parents waited outside the temple doors while I made the most significant commitment of my eternal existence. It is true that no one emerged from the temple with details about how beautiful the ceremony had been, and for this I am grateful. But it was damage control; in the eyes of my parents, nothing about this event could be beautiful: It was a betrayal. During the years prior to my engagement, I had tried to soften the pain with romantic explanations of the eternal nature of marriage and family, but in the end I failed. The bishop's telephone call had "confirmed" for them the "truth" that I, we the Mormons, believe non-Mormons to be "beneath" the saints of God. Nothing I could say to my parents could convince them otherwise, for they had heard the truth from one in authority.

It didn't help that I could not speak specifically about the phone call with my mother. If I broached the subject, she clammed up, shut down, turned hard as granite. I supposed she needed to pretend it hadn't happened: she isn't the kind of person who'd be comfortable admitting she had eavesdropped. I had always known there would be problems after my temple marriage, but what I was living was far beyond my worst fears, so deep was my parents' anger towards me, so whole-hearted their disgust with the church. Any speaking we did was perfunctory. When I did bring up the subject of the church or the wedding, I heard words like "mindless" and "cult." My mother began referring to the church as the KKK because of the white clothing worn in the temple. I had never had to deal with such harsh sentiments from her, not even during the earliest days of my conversion. To say I was angry with that particular bishop for countermanding the progress I had made in overcoming my parents' reservations about my involvement with and marriage to a Mormon would be a tremendous understatement. I felt terribly betrayed by him. My bishop had pledged support and understanding one day, then at the worst possible moment, yanked them away and replaced them with lies and false commands. Fortunately, my husband and I moved to another state immediately after our honeymoon, so I never had to face my former bishop again. I didn't trust myself not to tell him off.

I admit, though, many times during the months after my wedding I sat down, intending to write him a letter, to pour out my soul, to lay

plain for him the extreme difficulties I was having with my family as a direct consequence of the things he had said during that phone call. I felt he should know what he'd done, so he could sufficiently repent, but each time I sat to write to him, I found myself unable to do so. Eventually I decided the Holy Spirit was attempting to teach me humility and forgiveness, and eventually I stopped wanting him to hurt for having hurt me and my family.

Ironically it was another telephone call over a year later that explained why my hand had been stayed. My forgiveness of him, as I had supposed, was only a minor issue; my pain a surface wound in comparison.

The phone call came from the friend who had served as both my witness in the temple and my Maid of Honor, a fellow convert who understood my predicament all too well and a member of the same singles ward presided over by this particular bishop. She told me that the bishop had been released unceremoniously from his calling shortly after my wedding, that he had been diagnosed with what we then called manic depression. Apparently the phone conversation we had had that night was an early indicator of his struggle with mental unbalance.

My friend told me that, within weeks of my wedding, the bishop descended into deep depression. A successful businessman, he stopped working, stopped everything. Soon, as my friend reported, he needed to be watched twenty-four hours a day in order to protect him from himself. His grown children took turns sitting with him when his wife had to be out of the house. One night the bishop seemed particularly buoyant as he sat with one of his beloved children, reminiscing. When he begged her to drive to the local ice cream parlor and bring home a quart of the flavor they'd both loved during her childhood, she acquiesced, pleased that her father's jubilant old self seemed to be returning.

But when she returned home from her happy errand, she was greeted not with open arms, but with carnage. Her father, my bishop, had put a gun to his head and said his final amen. My letters, had I sent them, would likely have been received and opened by a devastated and grief-stricken wife.

Suddenly there was no longer anger in my heart, only an aching as I realized how confused and frustrated he must have felt as he spiraled into such an abyss of despair. Suddenly I understood how a man whom I had often heard expound the gospel with clarity could have preached the nonsense he did to me that night over the telephone. I remember voicing to my friend that maybe I should have allowed him to come to the ceremony, that maybe my refusal had somehow triggered it all.

No, she said. She had witnessed his struggle unfold from her bench in the chapel. No, there had been many things.

I hung up the phone and cried. I thought of my mother, but it was

several days before I summoned the courage to call her. We spoke about the weather and other trivial things, and then I said, "Remember that bishop who called the night before my wedding?"

Her reply was icy. "Vaguely."

"Kay called me last week. She said that he was diagnosed with manic depression not long after my wedding." I paused. "He killed himself, Mom."

She paused. "Oh, God."

I don't recall if I cried as we spoke, but I remember that I was shaking, wondering how she would react. Would she think: So you people let crazies be bishops? Would this strain our relationship even more? Fortunately, I underestimated my mother. The news of the bishop's suicide struck a deep chord of compassion in her. We had the first in-depth conversation we had had since that night before my wedding. She told me of her own youthful battle with thoughts of suicide and let me know that she understood that people who are depressed don't always say and do rational things. Although not during this phone conversation, shortly thereafter she said out of the blue, "Lisa, I'm proud of the way you think for yourself. Even when the pressure is on, you try to do what you think is right."

There. I had it. The words I had longed to hear from my mother for so long were finally spoken. In the seventeen years that have come and gone since my marriage, not once have my parents accused me of blind obedience or of being mindless, not once has the word "cult" been used to describe my religion. Instead they have come to admire the good that has come through my living a gospel-oriented life. It was as though through my disobedience to the bishop, I had opened the door through which respect could later enter. I proved to them that, when I do follow, there is no leash about my neck.

I wish that this reconciliation had been achieved in a happier manner, but I am comforted to see evidence that my disobedience to an improper request made by a struggling bishop meant that I had been obedient to myself, my sense of justice, my love for my family, and the Spirit.

The bell rings and I come back through time to my Gospel Doctrine class. I hear the instructor once again repeating the closing line of D&C 1:38. "Whether by mine own voice, or by the voice of my servant, it is the same." He smiles over the simplicity of the statement, then asks for a volunteer for prayer.

I frown and keep my hand down. Part of me still wishes that things could seem simple to me, that I didn't intellectualize, but I can't help myself; it comes naturally. I do wish I could simply move into a new ward and say all the right things to connect myself instantly with the new lives around me. I would like to feel I belong.

After all, I believe the same things other Latter-day Saints believe. I believe that Jesus is my Savior and that the Book of Mormon is what Joseph Smith said it is. I believe in the power and authority of the priesthood. But I also believe in me, in my own ability to receive divine inspiration, and to think with the brain God gave me. I believe he even offers me a chance to become divine—but not by being indiscriminately obedient.

During the prayer I relive a brief moment from today's class when I looked beyond the instructor, his wife, the former bishop, and stake Young Women's president, into the faces of the room's other non-participants with expressions as blank as my own must surely be. I wonder about their lives. What prevents them from speaking up. They can't all be shy. Do any of them understand faith in the way I do? The prayer ends, and suddenly blank expressions become friendly. Perhaps there are many who feel isolated, shouted down and out by the presiding minority whose self-assurance seems designed to make the less certain feel inferior. As I rise from my seat, I deliberately extend my hand to my nearest neighbor. He smiles while I tell him my name and silently promise myself that next week I will raise this same hand in class. Maybe I'll get into trouble. Maybe no one will like what I say. But I have been in trouble for good causes before, and, at least, I will like myself.