

# Frau Rüster and the Cure for Cognitive Dissonance

*Roger Terry*

When Elder Callister and I leaned our bikes against the fence at Hermann-Löns-Straße 9 and walked to the door, I had no idea that what was about to transpire would shape and anchor my soul for decades to come. And when we left the house and descended the steps less than an hour later, I had no context for gauging the magnitude of the experience we had just shared. I'm still acquiring that context.

Herr and Frau Rüster were our best investigators. At least Frau Rüster was. Her husband tolerated our visits and was cordial, but his search for the truth was more hypothetical than it was either pragmatic or urgent. Frau Rüster, on the other hand, wanted to know. Oh, how she wanted to know. She was reading the Book of Mormon and praying about it. And her Reformed Lutheran pastor was so intrigued by her new quest that he decided to lend a hand. He generously transformed his weekly Bible study hour into anti-Mormon hour. I'm confident these new lessons took far more preparation than his conventional treks through the New Testament. Such sacrifice on his part! Frau Rüster, of course, was thoroughly confused. On one side she was hearing the missionary lessons and reading the Book of Mormon; on the other, she was being exposed to every bit of dirt, credible or concocted, that good Pastor Kühne could unearth.

More than thirty years have now passed since I last saw Frau Rüster, but hardly a week goes by that I don't think about her. I'm quite sure she crossed my mind a few years back when a department reorganization moved me from my editorial post at the *Liahona* to the *Ensign*. I was somewhat surprised to learn that the *Ensign* subscribed to both *Dialogue* and *Sunstone* and circulated them among the editorial staff. I couldn't help

wondering about these subscriptions and the reasoning behind them. But then, the *Ensign* subscribed to many interesting publications: *Journal of Mormon History*, *BYU Studies*, *Pioneer*, *Utah Historical Quarterly*, *The Religious Educator*, *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, *Newsweek*, *Time*, *Reader's Digest*, *Biblical Archeological Review*, *Desert Saints*, the Seventh-day Adventists' *Signs*, Billy Graham's *Decision*, the Community of Christ's *Herald*, and my own personal favorite, *Vision*, a magazine aimed at the restoration branches that split off from the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in the 1980s. I figured somebody wanted the editorial staff to be informed. I wanted to be informed too. So I read all these periodicals. Took them on the bus with me as I commuted between Orem and the Church Office Building.

I learned a great deal. I learned that Tommy Lasorda coached in Ogden before he became famous in L.A. and that young Heber J. Grant had an affinity for beer. I learned that Seventh-day Adventists are saved by grace and so is Billy Graham. I learned that *Newsweek* has better cartoons than *Time*. I learned that the Community of Christ doesn't like to quote Joseph Smith. In fact, to me, they seemed a bit embarrassed at the uncomfortable fact that he is still considered their founder. I learned that, as of a couple of years ago, the restoration branches were squarely between a rock and a hard place. They believed their First Presidency and Quorum of Twelve Apostles had apostatized en masse a couple of decades ago. They wanted to organize a new church, at least a stake, but they couldn't because the revelations they still revere declare that only the First Presidency can organize a stake. I'm wondering how things will eventually shake out.

I also learned that the Garden Tomb really wasn't the place where the Savior's body was laid to rest. I learned that it was actually Sidney Rigdon who wrote the Lectures on Faith and that some of the "doctrine" in them is rather, shall we say, Protestant, and this may explain why the lectures were eventually dropped from the Doctrine and Covenants.

But of all these publications I was reading, *Dialogue* and *Sunstone* were most informative. I learned that adultery may, in fact, *not* be the sin next to murder. I learned that *Napoleon Dynamite's* Happy Hands Club represents the female cross-brain function. I learned that Noah's flood may have submerged only the Black Sea area and may have happened about 5600 B.C. I learned that the universe may be just a small portion of a more comprehensive multiverse. And I learned that in our corner of this hypothetical multiverse lives a whole host of very unhypothetical Mor-

mons and former Mormons and half-Mormons and quarter-Mormons and quasi-anti-neo-post-meta-counter-pseudo-Mormons who wrestle with dozens of issues and questions—everything from Native American DNA and polygamy to priesthood equality and evolution. I learned that, spiritually speaking, some of these issues have blown people adrift and have blown others apart. I learned that many intellectuals and individualists and iconoclasts have enormous frustration and microscopic patience with the perceived inflexibility and irrationality of Church bureaucracy. I generally shook my head and rolled my eyes at this last group. They had obviously never worked at Church magazines. What did they know?

I have not been naive for many years now, but this new reading opened my mind to the struggles of individuals as they come to see inconsistencies in the Church, its history, its founder, its scriptures, and its bureaucracy—as they shed their innocence and replace it with something that is far less comfortable for them and far less comforting. Most of the distress for thoughtful Mormons seems to revolve around Joseph Smith in one way or another. Rightly so. Richard Bushman stuck it in his title where no one could ignore it, but Joseph really was a rough stone. His life was surrounded by controversy because he *was* controversial—imperfect and unconventional and incomparable. Neither his fellow Saints nor his enemies could go to the Legacy Theater to see his life portrayed with skillful editing and majestic overtones. They saw him up close and personal, both the grandeur and the blemishes. Still, he himself had it so very right when he said to his followers shortly before his death, “You don’t know me.”<sup>1</sup> They didn’t, and we certainly don’t.

Some of the questions that perplex people concern the intersection of knowledge and belief. Is it really possible to know anything for certain in the field of religion? I’ve read essays by faithful intellectuals, rational arguments they have constructed to support their belief in the Church and their dedication to its teachings. Others try to deflect the question. “The goal of religious development,” a social scientist once asserted, “might not be the serenity of certainty, an absolute acceptance on faith, but the capacity to sustain the tension of not knowing. To be able to live with uncertainty, to be able to cope with the insecurities of an exceedingly complex world in order to control it would be a higher achievement religiously, I think.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, we should not seek to know with certainty but should embrace our uncertainty.

Another writer reasoned, “It’s not too hard for me to translate ‘I

know the Church is true' to 'I know I have had a burning in my bosom which confirms the goodness of the Church and the truth of the principles which it teaches.'"<sup>3</sup> His argument, apparently, is that this inner burning doesn't really constitute knowledge. So what *can* one know?

It has been a long, long time since I could say with a straight face that the gospel is simply beautiful and beautifully simple. I've gone the rounds with Correlation more than once over nebulous doctrines and unusable sources. Yes, Joseph Smith restored the fulness of the gospel, but he died before he filled in all the gaps and answered all the questions. Perhaps this was intentional.

Where Pastor Kühne got his information, Elder Callister and I didn't know; but as our Reformed Lutheran nemesis sowed the seeds of doubt, we tried to dig them up before they grew roots and sprouted. At least Elder Callister did. I was brand spankin' new in Germany and was struggling just to follow most conversations. I couldn't have added my two cents worth at that point even if I'd had the correct change. You see, I wanted to know the truth almost as desperately as Frau Rüster. Almost. I had grown up in a traditional Latter-day Saint home, but I had been more interested in sports and girls than deep religious questions, or even shallow ones. I knew all the Sunday School answers, but I'd never asked any questions—particularly the one I should have asked—until I walked through the front door of the Mission Home in Salt Lake City and became quite suddenly a stranger in a strange land. The bar in those days, of course, was much lower. The spiritual atmosphere in the Mission Home and then the LTM (which, I was told, stood for Longest Two Months) was entirely foreign to me. I struggled. I'd had six years of German in school, so the language was easy. But spiritual things were near impossible.

Most of the other elders were sure in their testimonies. They made me feel like a spiritual infant. But some others were in diapers, too—to a degree. As the weeks passed, however, they would inevitably stand in testimony meetings and tell how they had gone to an empty classroom one night and prayed and received an answer. I tried that too. But my prayers bounced off the ceiling, ricocheted around the room for a few seconds, then faded quickly into an ever-deeper silence. I was so ignorant spiritually I didn't know what a witness of the truth would feel like. If I received one, would I even recognize it?

I prayed incessantly. I pleaded. I probably made promises I knew I couldn't keep. Silence. I read the Book of Mormon through in two and a

half weeks. I took Moroni at his word. I asked with a sincere heart and with real intent. Silence.

I did know what the Spirit felt like. We'd met in passing a couple of times, once very impressively during the sacrament meeting where Doug King gave his mission report. But I didn't assume that this encounter constituted a witness. It was a strong feeling, certainly a burning within, but it didn't impart any knowledge to me, other than the rather obvious fact that I wanted to serve a mission and become the kind of person Doug had become. For some reason, I assumed a testimony was more than just a warm feeling. I'd had warm feelings about *The Lord of the Rings*, Charmian Carr in *The Sound of Music*, and Grandma's pumpkin chiffon pie. Maybe I was naive. Maybe I wasn't. But even the warm feeling eluded me. I swore I'd never fly off to Germany without a testimony. But I was basically chicken. I didn't want to endure the disgrace of giving up and going home. Eventually, I convinced myself that going to Germany, even without a testimony, was the right thing to do.

I arrived in Rendsburg, a small city in the heart of Schleswig-Holstein, in late August. Six weeks passed slowly without any revelations from heaven; and by the time we leaned our bikes against Rusters' fence and approached the door, it was October. I'd been praying for a witness the whole time, but my hope was running low. Interesting thing was, I was praying for Frau Ruster to get a testimony with more real intent than I was praying for myself at that point. I loved the Ruster family because Elder Callister loved them. We prayed for them morning, noon, and night, and I pled for them in my personal prayers. I don't remember what sorts of information or disinformation Pastor Kühne was feeding Frau Ruster, but I can certainly imagine, and I know the questions he raised lay at the heart of her struggle. But she wasn't about to give in to either side so easily. She wanted to know the truth about Mormonism. She wasn't about to get baptized into this "sect" unless she got an answer. Logic and persuasion were not going to work on Frau Ruster. An LDS family was fellowshipping her and her husband, but that wasn't going to make a bit of difference either. Only the answer to one particular question would do, thank you. And for some reason God wasn't in any hurry to give that answer.

I've been intrigued recently as I've read essays and articles by Latter-day Saints of prominent (or at least assumed) intellectual stature. Sometimes I get the impression they can't see the forest for the trees. Perhaps because they grew up with it, they don't see what Frau Ruster saw so

clearly. The validity of the LDS Church is not to be discerned by putting all the pieces of a theological puzzle together. It isn't to be proved or disproved by determining whether Joseph Smith was involved in folk magic, by showing scientifically that Native Americans are or aren't descended from a band of wandering Israelites, or by exploring whether the politics and economics laid out in the Book of Mormon reflect Joseph's concerns about nineteenth-century America. I think I understand the questions and reservations thoughtful people have about Mormonism—doctrinal, historical, ecclesiastical, cultural, and organizational. I understand them, but for the most part I don't share them. I can't. Whenever I try, I keep coming back to what happened to me and Elder Callister and Frau Rüter on October 2, 1975, in the living room of the house on Hermann-Löns-Straße.

Frau Rüter was home alone that day—her husband was at work, her twin nine-year-old daughters at school—but she invited us in. The predictable Pastor Kühne had been by recently with a new piece of anti-Mormon propaganda, and she was perplexed. I don't remember Frau Rüter's particular question that day—it seemed she had an endless supply—but I will never forget Elder Callister's answer. Maybe he had it all planned out. Maybe the Spirit whispered something to him. Or maybe he was just at his wits' end over this exasperating woman and all her doubts. Whatever the reason, he pulled from his pocket a brochure recounting Joseph Smith's story and simply read a couple of paragraphs to her:

*It was nevertheless a fact that I had beheld a vision. I have thought since, that I felt much like Paul, when he made his defense before King Agrippa, and related the account of the vision he had when he saw a light, and heard a voice; but still there were but few who believed him; some said he was dishonest, others said he was mad; and he was ridiculed and reviled. But all this did not destroy the reality of his vision. He had seen a vision, he knew he had, and all the persecution under heaven could not make it otherwise; and though they should persecute him unto death, yet he knew, and would know to his latest breath, that he had both seen a light and heard a voice speaking unto him, and all the world could not make him think or believe otherwise.*

*So it was with me. I had actually seen a light, and in the midst of that light I saw two Personages, and they did in reality speak to me; and though I was persecuted for saying that I had seen a vision, yet it was true; and while they were persecuting me, reviling me, and speaking all manner of evil against me falsely for so saying, I was led to say in my heart: Why persecute me for telling the truth? I have actually seen a vision; and who am I that I can withstand God, or why does the world think to make me deny what I have actually seen? For I had seen a vision; I*

*knew it, and I knew that God knew it, and I could not deny it, neither dared I do it; at least I knew that by so doing I would offend God, and come under condemnation.*  
(JS-H 1:24-25)

While Elder Callister was reading, a marvelous presence entered the room. How can I describe it? It was like pure electricity. It was as if an almost suffocating cloud of power and light filled the room. I have felt this power at other times in my life, but never like this, never with this intensity or immediacy or purpose. It was overwhelming, and it was the purest and holiest influence I have ever encountered. Elder Callister stopped reading, and none of us could speak for quite some time. I don't know how long we sat there in the throbbing silence. It could have been an eternity. One of Joseph Smith's teachings about the Holy Ghost was demonstrated vividly by the presence that visited us that day. It bypassed the body completely and communicated pure intelligence to the spirit. Imprinted on my soul during that encounter was a very specific and unmistakable message: "It is true! It is all true!" To this day I can honestly say I *know* only two things with absolute certainty—that I exist and the truth of what the Spirit revealed to me that day. I have never felt a presence more real than the one that came into Frau Ruster's home that day. Mere flesh and blood pale in comparison.

Eventually, not knowing what else to do, Elder Callister handed the Joseph Smith brochure to Frau Ruster and asked her to read it and pray about it. We excused ourselves. As I recall, she didn't say a word or even see us to the door. When we stepped outside into the thin air and walked to the gate, Elder Callister exclaimed, "Wow, did you feel that!"

I don't know that I answered. I had my witness. I knew. So did Frau Ruster. When we visited a couple of days later, she asked to be baptized. She said she had her answer. No more questions. We told her no. We wanted her husband to be baptized with her. We wanted him to receive the same witness. We wanted a whole family to join the Church together. Missionaries tend to be idealists. Herr Ruster was a bit shaken up by this new development, but he agreed to more seriously investigate the Church. He promised to read the Book of Mormon and pray. He never did. And I believe this is the greatest regret I have from my mission, that we insisted Frau Ruster delay her baptism. The doubts returned, and so, of course, did Pastor Kühne.

I learned through this experience that another thing Joseph Smith taught about the Holy Ghost is true: "A man may receive the Holy Ghost,

and it may descend upon him and not tarry with him” (D&C 130:23). “There is a difference between the Holy Ghost and the gift of the Holy Ghost,” the Prophet explained. “Cornelius received the Holy Ghost before he was baptized, which was the convincing power of God unto him of the truth of the Gospel, but he could not receive the gift of the Holy Ghost until after he was baptized. Had he not taken this sign or ordinance upon him, the Holy Ghost which convinced him of the truth of God, would have left him.”<sup>4</sup>

Frau Ruster did not receive the gift of the Holy Ghost in time. Perhaps someday we will be held accountable for our decision. We were both nineteen. I hope God takes that into account. But eventually Frau Ruster lost the very thing she had prayed for and received. We were devastated.

A transfer took Elder Callister away soon after this experience. Elder Blades and I tried to teach Herr Ruster. He was indifferent. Frau Ruster faded. One day she told us that a famous pastor was coming to town to preach. She invited us to come listen to him, insisting that we would feel the Spirit when he spoke, just as we had in her living room. We went with her and her husband. Elder Blades and I didn’t feel a thing. I don’t think Herr Ruster did either. Frau Ruster, on the other hand, claimed she felt the Spirit there. I was not convinced, so I asked her if it was the same Spirit she had felt that October day in her living room. “No,” she confessed, “that Spirit was calling me to repentance.” Fascinating, I thought, how the Holy Ghost could tailor a specific message for each person present.

I’ve often reflected on the experience we shared that distant October day. And I’ve come to two conclusions. First, I’m very grateful for Frau Ruster and her sincere desire to know the truth of our message, even if she did lose that knowledge. I’ve wondered whose prayer was really being answered that day. I don’t know. But I am fairly sure of one thing: Without her faith and persistence, I doubt that I would have received an answer to my plea. My faith was at low tide by that time. Like many people, because I had prayed long and hard and had received no answer, I was at the point of giving up. I was ready to just concede that I didn’t have the faith to get a witness. If I am honest, I must confess that it was probably Frau Ruster’s faith combined with Elder Callister’s love and prayers for her that unleashed the powers of heaven that day. Second, regardless of why it came, I’m grateful this manifestation arrived in the presence of two other witnesses and that it came in the manner it did. I’m grateful I didn’t have a



warm feeling about the Book of Mormon some lonely night in the quiet confines of an empty LTM classroom. Let me be specific about this. What I experienced in Frau Ruster's living room was not a simple burning in the bosom. What we experienced was an outside presence that entered the room and filled it to overflowing. That it filled us, too, was inevitable. But because two other people were present and felt the intense power that I felt, I've never been able to talk myself out of the fact that it happened. I've never been able to convince myself that it was all just in my head—that I imagined it. No, Frau Ruster and Elder Callister have prevented that. My companion's exclamation as we walked to our bikes has been very significant to me. And so was Frau Ruster's request to be baptized. Those reactions convince me that my sometimes vivid imagination wasn't very vivid that day. This was the most real thing I've ever experienced.

I've often wondered why was I favored to have such an experience when others who pray faithfully for a sure witness find the heavens firmly closed. I don't know. Maybe most of us need a Frau Ruster. I certainly did. In fact, I'm reasonably sure, given what I know about myself and my particular bag of experiences and weaknesses, that without this overwhelming witness I would probably not be active in the Church today, perhaps not even a member. So I'm grateful for this tender mercy from heaven and for its timing.

Testimonies, of course, come in many ways, shapes, and sizes. Most often they probably come as a quiet feeling of confirmation and grow over time. Sometimes, for some reason, they seem not to come at all. But now and then, they come suddenly and with overwhelming force, and there is absolutely nothing wrong with receiving this sort of witness. If God grants it, why should I be ashamed of it or suggest that others can't have a similar experience? At least because of this encounter I understand the difference between the whisperings of the Spirit and the "power of the Holy Ghost" (Moro. 10:4), and the difference, to me, is both immense and important.

When I say I know, I don't mean that I know I had a burning feeling within. What I mean is that I know with perfect certainty the truth about something central to Mormonism. I know that Joseph Smith saw God the Father and his beloved Son. Historians may squabble over the details of the story and the differences between Joseph's various accounts. But I'm no historian. I don't know how factual all the details are. All I know is that his story, the canonized version he recorded in 1838, is accurate enough for God to endorse it as truth. This I know. I know. I know.

Now, let me conclude with a disclaimer. This witness doesn't qualify me for any great blessings beyond those directly associated with its reception. It certainly doesn't make me a better Christian than the least of those who harbor sincere doubts. Many who wish they knew but don't are far more likely to be exalted in the celestial kingdom than I am. This experience marks the beginning of my path, not the end. But it has kept me from wandering off and getting lost. It has also provided me with perspective. The questions surrounding Joseph Smith and the work he started are both numerous and troubling. I acknowledge that. I don't know the answers to very many of them. Some things I just have to put on the shelf for now. I really have no choice. Just because Joseph Smith and the Church he helped restore were and are not perfect doesn't mean they are not true. They don't have to be perfect to be true.

#### Notes

1. Joseph Fielding Smith, comp., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1972 printing), 361.

2. Clyde Parker and Brent Miller, "Dialogues on Science and Religion," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 8, nos. 3/4 (Autumn/Winter 1973): 104.

3. Robert C. Fletcher, "One Scientist's Spiritual Autobiography," *Sunstone*, September 1985, 35.

4. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 199.