

Undefined Borders

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My husband Jake loves women's fashions. A lot. One of his hobbies is spending time at the mall, looking for shoes, dresses, make-up, and jewelry, and he is an expert at finding clothes that are flattering and stylish. He can pull together a fabulous outfit with ease, which might come in handy, except that the outfits aren't for me—they're for him. I am an LDS woman who is married to a loving, wonderful man who also happens to be a cross-dresser. Not exactly the stuff of Mormon fairy tales.

My husband and I were both raised in families from Utah Valley who were actively involved in the Church. Our lives followed the typical pattern of so many of our peers, and included baptism, a mission, Church callings, temple marriage, and children. Even now, we are active in our ward, participate in our callings, and might outwardly seem to be a "typical" Mormon family. But, there are few things about a cross-dressing Mormon man that are typical, and it has taken a lot of effort for us to come to terms with how complicated the issue is. After years of marriage, I have acknowledged that having a heterosexual husband who likes cross-dressing doesn't need to be the defining factor for the relationships in our lives, but he feels very differently.

Jake feels terrible guilt because of his desire to cross-dress. The guilt comes both from the Church's focus on conventional heterosexual marriages and children as the only acceptable familial unit ordained by God, as well as from the social taboo of cross-dressing as an effeminate and stereotypically homosexual behavior. While some cross-dressers are actually heterosexual, some people still view cross-dressing as a behavior of homosexual men and transgender men.

Our family fits the definition of an acceptable family by the Church's standards, but because Jake also has urges that have such strong associations with deviant sexuality, he feels that the fit isn't

genuine. This discrepancy has left him to suffer the anguish that comes from feeling displaced and alone. While he has enjoyed much success and happiness in his life, he constantly feels as if his “issue” is somehow inhibiting his spiritual salvation. As a result, it complicates every relationship in his life—our marriage and the relationships with his parents, his siblings, his children, and most particularly, the Church. The culmination of these convoluted relationships leaves him living in a constant state of ambiguity.

The relationship that has suffered most significantly in Jake’s life is with his parents. Like many Mormon parents, my in-laws explained only the most basic details of sex to their kids. The subject of sex was so off-limits that Jake never felt comfortable asking what his parents did or did not believe. Jake felt that sexual pleasure was a sin and grew up presuming that sex was a sacred obligation that would lead to procreation and heavenly advancement. Thus, Jake never perceived sex as a gift from God to foster happiness and enjoyment as a means in and of itself, but only as a means to an end. Sexual transgression was explained as masturbation, premarital sex, extramarital sex, and anything remotely related to homosexuality. Quoting from Leviticus 18:22, Jake’s parents told him that homosexuality was an “abomination” that would bring swift and everlasting damnation. They also taught that homosexuality was a choice and, therefore, that gay and lesbian people were openly choosing to mock God in an attempt to avoid the procreation that would bring eternal happiness.

Because sex was considered such a taboo topic while Jake was growing up, he didn’t understand what cross-dressing was; and at first, he didn’t even realize that it was a sexual issue. Instead, in his early childhood, it began as a natural curiosity about gender difference. Boys’ clothing was boring and plain. The pants and shirt he wore to play in during the week resembled the pants and shirt he wore to church; there was nothing that set apart his clothes as being special. In contrast, his sister got to wear dresses on Sunday and put bows in her curled hair. His sister would twirl around in a circle to show off her clothes, which made Jake particularly envious. Jake loved dress patterns and the soft material that her dresses were made of. The velvet and silky fabrics were rarely found in boys’ clothing. In addition, Jake’s mother bought his sis-

ter pretty tights and shoes for church, which were far more distinctive than his brown socks and shoes.

As a child, not only did Jake like the clothing of women, but he remembers wanting to dress up to look like girls and women. This included desiring to mimic the curved body shape of women, to have longer hair, and to wear perfume. To him, the idea of being dressed up as a woman was not only exciting but also evoked the peace and nurturing he associated with femininity. In wanting to dress like a woman, he hoped to be able to nurture himself and calm himself down when he was feeling anxious or sad.

It wasn't until Jake was older and began to get information from friends that he realized there was even such a thing as a "cross-dresser" and was horrified that it was linked, to a certain extent within American culture, to homosexuality. His father in particular was very intolerant of homosexuals, so Jake felt that, if he in any way exhibited effeminate behavior, his father's disfavor would spiritually disinherit him from the family. Jake remembers frequently hearing his father talk about homosexuals as compromising their masculinity. Jake was afraid that his embrace of femininity and his pleasure in cross-dressing automatically made him homosexual to some extent.

Thus, Jake hid his curiosity and tried to ignore his fascination with women's clothing. His ability to experiment was limited because he was still living at home; while he had an older sister whose clothes he often tried to wear, he was disappointed that she didn't own any sexy clothing to make him feel more feminine. His mother bought his sister plain white underwear and bras that resembled the simplicity of garments, perhaps in an effort to discourage his sister from viewing her body in a sexual way; to this day, his sister jokes about her "grandma underwear." Jake would try on her clothes when she was gone; but when he realized how much he enjoyed it, he sank into spells of guilt and self-hatred that would last for weeks. In keeping with what he had been taught, he turned to prayer and fasting to try and rid himself of his cross-dressing urge. He figured that if only he demonstrated enough faith by praying hard enough or fasting long enough, God would remove his trial. This approach ultimately did not work, and Jake

concluded that he wasn't exhibiting enough faith—that he needed to try even harder.

Jake hoped that his urge to cross-dress would gradually subside, but it did not; and once he left for college, his newfound freedom brought with it an increase in experimentation. No longer feeling the need to be quite as discreet, he bought lingerie, clothing, and wigs online and in local stores. While many college boys spent time looking at pornography and marveling at naked women, Jake was more enthralled with trying to *be* a woman. Fully aware that his behavior was uncommon within his religious and cultural community, he began to transfer the disgust he felt with himself over his cross-dressing to disgust with every aspect of his life. He was unable to feel self-love or acceptance, which gradually led to a severe depression.

As he prepared his mission papers, Jake felt obligated to see his bishop to explain the situation. Although he knew that cross-dressing wasn't encouraged by the Church, where did it fit exactly? It wasn't a gender-identity issue because he felt overwhelmingly that he was still a man and didn't want that to change. It wasn't homosexual behavior; but because it was presumably linked to so many forbidden behaviors, Jake knew it was strongly discouraged. Instead of discussing the cross-dressing, the bishop's questions revolved entirely around masturbation. It must have seemed logical to the bishop to find some sexual transgression that could be associated with the behavior, and thus simultaneously discourage both. Jake still felt confused, but certain that his urge needed to be more strictly controlled. As his mission grew closer, Jake remembers one episode where he actually burned some of his clothing and wigs. Although throwing the items away would have sufficed, Jake instead wanted to completely destroy any evidence of his behavior.

After his mission, Jake and I began dating; and he knew his cross-dressing would affect our future relationship. Before we became engaged, Jake was completely honest with me and explained that he liked to cross-dress. Being extremely young, I didn't entirely understand the marital consequences of what he was explaining and was so in love that I willingly accepted his behavior. Jake gradually eased me into what his cross-dressing entailed, and it was initially easy to accept. I believed that this impulse might

lessen significantly once we were married and he experienced the sexual intimacy of marriage. To me, Jake's cross-dressing seemed like a way to cope with the frustration of being in love and trying to wait until marriage to have sex. I didn't think to ask any questions about how long he had experimented with cross-dressing, how it made him feel, or whether he wanted to continue the behavior in the future.

Through most of our early marriage, Jake used cross-dressing as a way to relieve stress. By taking on a different persona, he felt able to escape from his own problems. After a couple of hours, he was able to change back into his clothes, wash off the make-up, and go on with his life. The cross-dressing itself didn't present as many problems as the sadness that accompanied it.

The more I accepted Jake's cross-dressing, the more he wanted to take it to deeper levels. Once he began dressing up to look as close to a real woman as possible, it became more problematic for me. I wanted the cross-dressing to be completely separate from our own sex life, because I am not sexually attracted to women, particularly women who are technically men. However, I was obviously aware of how problematic my feelings were. How do you keep a sexual issue out of a marriage? It isn't easy to just draw distinct lines and say, "This part of your sexuality is fine to share with me, but this part isn't."

The mutual frustration became intense, as we both asked those unanswerable questions. Why couldn't my husband's sexual feelings be similar to those of what I considered an "average" man's to be? I had fallen in love with my husband before I was aware of his cross-dressing and therefore felt I had specifically tried to avoid the messy conflict surrounding sexual ambiguity. I was frustrated that I needed to deal with cross-dressing in addition to adjusting to married life, and I often wondered if I would have agreed to date him had I known the information when we first met. Jake's frustration was equally intense, if not worse. He kept wondering why God wouldn't take these feelings from him. Why couldn't he just feel "acceptable" urges and not have to put me through all this sadness and frustration?

Jake has tried at various points in our marriage to completely suppress the behavior; but when he inevitably returns to it, he ex-

periences such a strong sense of failure and inadequacy that it affects our relationship. I am very accepting of Jake, but he still wishes that he could somehow overcome his impulse toward cross-dressing. At times, he has been angry that I am so accepting, as if my displaying a strong aversion to cross-dressing would provide sufficient motivation to rid himself of it. These challenges have been frequent and difficult, particularly when Jake wants the sexual aspects of cross-dressing to be part of our heterosexual relationship. However, after years of struggle, we are finally comfortable with openly communicating about the issue and Jake has become more accepting of his cross-dressing as it relates to our relationship.

There are still moments when I ask myself what a sexual relationship might be like without the cross-dressing. How would I view my husband differently? If I went through the closet and didn't find lingerie that he bought for himself, would I consider him to be more masculine? I even wonder sometimes if he might decide eventually that he is transgendered and leave to pursue another life. Although I know that he loves me and our children, I don't understand the intensity of his feelings and can't accurately judge what he feels about his cross-dressing.

After our son was born, Jake began to view his cross-dressing in terms of how it would affect his parenting. Should he ever explain to our children, particularly to our son, what he has struggled with his entire life? What if he did try to eventually tell our children, and it deeply affected the way they viewed him? Or what if he didn't tell them, and one of our own children suffered with similar feelings that could perhaps be eased if he or she had the unconditional support of a parent who truly understands? Jake is convinced that his own suffering could have been greatly minimized if his parents had been able to talk more openly about sex, and is determined to avoid the same mistake with our children.

Soon after our last child was born, Jake's hatred of his cross-dressing became almost suffocating, so we decided to seek medical help. He tried an anti-depressant but still felt immense disgust with himself. Then, Jake sought professional counseling. His therapist helped him to explore his need for acceptance by suggesting that he tell a few close family members about his cross-dressing to find a small support group. This approach became increasingly

complicated because Jake had always felt the need to tell his parents but anticipated a negative reaction. He suspected that his parents' pride in his successful life would be marred if they actually knew the "real" him.

Jake started out by telling my family, who espouse more liberal beliefs than many members of the Church. They accepted him wholeheartedly and encouraged his decision to work toward gaining self-love. He also decided to tell his sister, who was extremely supportive and loving. He desperately wanted to tell his parents as well; however, the thought of their rejection and disgust made him literally want to die. By this point, he was on a suicide watch and unable to function. His close relationship with his sister became beneficial, and she bravely volunteered to tell his parents for him. Under the circumstances, this was the best option, so he gratefully accepted and she explained the situation to their parents.

As expected, his father's first question was "Is he gay?" Her assurance that he was not gradually led to his parents' conclusion that the cross-dressing was partially okay because "it's not technically a sin." My in-laws judge behavior only by what the Church has declared regarding its righteous or sinful nature. My father-in-law, who has served in several bishoprics, specifically told me that the *Church Handbook of Instructions* did not discuss the topic at length; however, since I am not privy to the handbook, I am unsure of whether this is true. Regardless, my in-laws were so relieved that Jake wasn't gay and committing "grievous sin," that they didn't even address the issue further.

However, in a phone conversation with my father-in-law, I specifically explained that even if cross-dressing *were* a sin, Jake would still engage in the behavior. I wanted him to understand that Jake wasn't choosing to cross-dress because it was a form of sexual expression that he thought was acceptable; he was choosing to cross-dress because he felt strongly impelled to do so, and would continue to engage in it, regardless of what the Church's policy might be. Instead, my father-in-law ignored me and only talked about how Scottish men wear kilts, failing to see that as a cultural tradition, wearing a kilt is very different than the cross-dressing Jake does. He couldn't grasp that cross-dressing is a sexually tied behavior and instead asked if we had prayed about trying to help

Jake “fix” his “problem” so he could be normal. Although my in-laws didn’t seem to overtly blame me for the cross-dressing, I could sense that letting it escalate to this point was a reflection on me as well. The conversation was frustrating and hopeless, but Jake at least felt some relief in knowing that his parents were finally aware of his struggle.

To this day, my in-laws refuse to bring up cross-dressing and continue on as if they aren’t aware of it. It is this reaction that has brought the greatest disappointment to Jake. He sees their behavior as an extension of the tendency of many Church members to shy away from independent, critical thinking. As Mormons, we excel at focusing on the absolutes—and, more specifically, absolute obedience. As soon as young children enter Primary, we focus on following the Prophet, how the Prophet won’t lead us astray, and the importance of obedience. These themes are consistent throughout the entire Church, and questioning is often viewed as a sign of disobedience. We believe we cannot be righteous and disobedient—these two concepts must be diametrically opposed.

As a Church member, Jake sensed the very clear implications surrounding homosexuality. Although cross-dressing is often a heterosexual behavior, many Church members view anything that deviates from the norms of conventional masculinity and femininity with suspicion. Within the Church framework, we’re taught that homosexual acts are entirely and absolutely wrong; and if even small shades of gray creep in (homosexual feelings), they are quickly put back into very specific categories (feelings versus acts). If an individual is subject to these feelings, that is tolerated; but the instant that someone acts on those feelings, that is blameworthy. Therefore, we take a complex concept like sexuality and continually divide it further and further into absolutes to ensure that any issue can be seen through the framework of absolutism that we understand.

If we can put sexuality in such stark terms of black and white, it frees us, as a Church, from dealing with the messy nature of sexuality. However, in spite of the efforts to see everything in terms of black and white, at some point it becomes clear that many shades of gray inevitably creep in, defying our ability to see them as wholly good or wholly bad. What do we do about homosexuals? Bisexuals? Transsexuals? Cross-dressers? To a lesser extent, what

about heterosexual couples who have no desire to have children and instead pursue careers and other interests? At some point, it seems to many in the Church that any departure from sexual norms is merely a matter of self-control, facing the trial, and drawing strength from God to overcome the inappropriate feelings. I expect that, like Jake, many live on the border of what is viewed as wholly good or wholly bad.

From our own situation, Jake and I have experienced firsthand the hurt of conditional love and acceptance. The greater edict of Christ to love fully and without guile is overshadowed by the finer points of policy. Many of us have become so engrossed in a need to have everything strictly defined that we have missed the straightforward, powerful simplicity of loving others and aiding them in their spiritual progression. The love that Jake's parents exhibit seems very much dependent on his choices as they relate to the Church's absolutist strictures. We know that Jake's parents love him very much and are not trying to cause him stress or hurt with their reaction, but they are afraid to ask the questions that might lead them to the conclusion that the Church doesn't have an answer to everything. More importantly, they are afraid that, if the Church doesn't have an absolute explanation for sexual ambiguity, then perhaps there are other ways in which the Church is limited.

As we have struggled to place our struggle in the context of our beliefs, I often think of Christ chastising the scribes and Pharisees in the New Testament. He denounces their hypocrisy and calls them "whited sepulchers, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness" (Matt. 23:27-28). Because the Pharisees viewed religion as a strict and unyielding set of rules, they found safety in absolute obedience. Jake and I have encountered many Church members who are just as fervently dedicated to following every small detail of our own policies, even to an obsessive degree. I inwardly recoil at the numerous references my father-in-law makes to the *Church Handbook of Instructions*. He seems to reverence it as scripture. Some Church members could probably quote the rules of such texts backwards and forwards; but if someone asked them to sit down and have a conversation with a homosexual, bisexual, or

transgendered person, would they be able to summon the acceptance and love to view him or her as a beloved child of God? Of all the rules, it seems ironic that we, as a Church, often seem to have the biggest problem following the most basic and essential commandment: to act with love.

We have now moved away from Utah and Jake's parents. I am happy to report that Jake has found greater peace and self-acceptance. Cross-dressing has and will continue to affect every personal relationship in Jake's life, and he still finds the interaction with his parents difficult. In spite of this, he is trying his best to show them the unconditional love and respect they have not been able to reciprocate. Perhaps the most pivotal issue for Jake is how his cross-dressing has affected both his belief in and feeling toward the Church. Having been raised in an environment where you either knew the Church was true or you didn't, Jake has realized that, if it came down to viewing things with that certainty, he wouldn't be able to say that the Church was true. To Jake, the "truth" of the Church is intertwined with its ability to promote love and, more specifically, the type of love that isn't tied to someone's willingness to submit to a set of absolute rules. With this realization, Jake accepts that the Church is just one option of many available to use in seeking happiness and contentment in life.

Being married to a cross-dresser has drawn me into a world that is not only sexually ambiguous but also religiously ambiguous. Seeing Jake's struggle to find unconditional love in both his family and the Church has also caused me to examine my own relationship with the Church. For me, the Church is something I've had to sort through piece by piece, finding some things that I believe in and other things I don't. By allowing myself to accept the good that it has to offer without obsessing about the truth of each teaching, I've found that it becomes more worthwhile. Because of this, both Jake and I continue to participate in the Church, while still grappling with the difficult question of where exactly we fit in. We have come to terms with the fact that there are plenty of questions and few answers. Not wholly included or excluded, accepted or unaccepted, we occupy the immense and ambiguous borderland of the undefined.



John Sproul,
Untitled,
graphite on paper, 19"x 19",
2008.



John Sproul,
Untitled,
graphite on paper, 10"x 8",
2008.