

IN OUR LOVELY OUBLIETTE:
THE UN/INTENDED CONSEQUENCES
OF BOUNDARY MAKING &
KEEPING FROM A GAY
MORMON PERSPECTIVE

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I joined the Church at a very young age and grew up attending meetings without my family—who were, by and large, not religious. One of my earliest memories is walking home from school with Ricky, my next-door neighbor and playmate. We were just coming up on the gate that connected the schoolyard to the gravel road I lived on. We were talking about what we wanted to be when we grew up. I don't remember what he said, but his father was a border patrol officer, so I assume he said something like "police officer" or "FBI agent." When my turn came, I said—with conviction—"a wife." Ricky's eyes grew wide, and I knew then and there that I'd crossed a line. I was quick-witted for an eight-year-old and brushed it all off as a joke (ha! ha!) and spent the next few minutes talking earnestly about how much I wanted to be an architect.

Of course, I didn't really want to be a wife. But I was eight years old, and in my mind, if all I really wanted from the future was a husband, then that must mean that I wanted to be a wife.

I never crossed that line again. Instead, I buried whatever had blossomed that beautiful spring morning. Of course, buried things refuse

to stay buried—especially beautiful things like love. Still, it wasn't until fifteen years later that I once again dared to utter something so very close to my heart. It was 3:00 am on a Sunday morning and I was up late with a neighbor talking about what we wanted to be when we grew up (I sense a pattern here), and out of the blue he asked the question I hadn't dared ask myself:

“Harry,” he said. “Are you gay?”

I mumbled “yes” and then quickly excused myself—“it's late and I've got church in the morning.”

Today, I'm an out gay man and an active member of my ward. I serve in the Elders Quorum presidency, I organize our annual chili cook-off, and I'm the priesthood chorister. In my profile on mormon.org, I say:

As a gay man who understands that my orientation is a gift and not a curse, I've often been asked how it is that I could possibly be part of a Church that so thoroughly misunderstands who I am and my value in the eyes of my Father in Heaven. It's hard, I say. I pray for change . . . but I also pray for patience. I was born gay . . . and I chose to be Mormon. And being Mormon is a choice I make every day. It's not always an easy choice—but it's mine.

The Church is a work in progress. Just like me.

I am, you might say, intimately familiar with the myriad boundaries imposed on queer members of the Church. I am, I must confide, painfully aware of their costs.

This is the final session of a three-day conference on boundary making and keeping as it pertains to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I'm sure you've heard plenty of boundary metaphors—walls, fences, lines in the sand. So I'll skip the beautiful one I'd crafted, using Mississippi River levees . . . and, instead, just jump to the pay-off:

Boundaries are morally neutral. They keep things in, they keep things out. Sometimes they keep the right things in and the right things

out, and sometimes they don't. And almost always there are unintended consequences. Talking about these consequences is important. It helps us evaluate and improve the boundary. Responsible gatekeepers and wall builders take stock of the boundaries they maintain. Responsible gatekeepers and wall builders take notice of problems.

The Policy of Exclusion (The POX)

On the afternoon of Thursday, November 5, 2015 at 2:59 p.m., John Dehlin of Mormon Stories fame posted the following to Facebook:

Hearing credible rumor (acknowledging it's just a rumor at this point) of a new definition of LDS Apostasy that now specifically includes same-gender marriage as grounds for apostasy.

Fourteen minutes later, he confirmed the rumor with a screenshot of the change. In short order, additional details were added, namely that children of such couples were to be denied baptism and other blessings of membership.

What followed was a storm of epic proportions.

For the first few hours, I watched as defenders of the faith argued vigorously that this was a stunt or hoax by Dehlin to defame the Church. The Church, they argued, would never do such a thing. But as more details came out and as news outlets got around to the business of fact-checking the story, the song changed and suddenly the Church—which couldn't possibly do such a thing—was on God's errand.

It was a sight to behold.

The texts, messages, and phone calls began to stream in and did not stop for a solid week. I and so many of my brothers and sisters in Christ were in shock and we were seeking each other out—"Did you hear?"; "Are you okay?"

The next morning, I posted something to my Facebook wall that was picked up by my friends at *By Common Consent*, a Mormon group blog:

As I lay here this morning, awash in a flood of emotion—shock, dismay, disappointment, fear—I am coming to the idea that last night’s policy announcement was a profound betrayal. Not the hot betrayal of animus, but the cold betrayal of studied indifference.

Yes, it feels like animus. It looks like animus, but it smells like the well-oiled machinery of an inhuman bureaucracy—grinding away. And this morning, I am mustering what strength I have to whisper to myself “the worm forgives the plough.”



To my friends who have left and to my friends who are now leaving: I understand; being a part of the Kingdom of God isn’t supposed to hurt this much. You’ll be sorely missed—perhaps not by shepherds who should know better, but by me, at least . . . and by others, who notice when virtue goes out of them.



I’ve said, elsewhere, that being a Mormon is a choice I make every day. Today is a hard day to choose . . . but today I choose to stay. The Church is traveling through new territory . . . and the roads out here can be brutal. Last night, our wagon lost a wheel.

Yet I have hope. The Promised Land is out there. A land where the full spectrum of godly love is embraced. . . . Where families of all stripes are nurtured by the good word of God, as they go about magnifying their holy calling.

To borrow a phrase from our cousins in faith: Next year in Jerusalem.¹

1. D Christian Harrison, “Yet I Have Hope,” *By Common Consent*, Nov. 6, 2015, retrieved from <https://bycommonconsent.com/2015/11/06/yet-i-have-hope/>.

My heart had been cut out and this was the best I could do. The Policy of Exclusion—P, O, X—was real.

The Church's public relations apparatus creaked into action and did what it could to manage the story—including a half-hearted attempt to describe the Policy of Exclusion as a blessing for the children involved. I'll set aside the question of whether or not the Policy of Exclusion was in any way inspired. I'll also set aside the real consequences for the families targeted by the policy. I will, instead—ever so briefly—discuss the fallout from this clumsy act of boundary making and keeping.

1) There have been and will continue to be suicides as a result of the Policy of Exclusion and the climate it fosters. The numbers are hard to come by (for obvious reasons), but there are already confirmed deaths.

2) Professional and armchair apologists are already distorting core doctrines of the Church to make space for this heretofore unimaginable act of cruelty. It began with frightening speed just a couple hours after John Dehlin's post and continues to this day: baptism, the line goes, can wait; the gift of the Holy Ghost isn't as essential for children as we've been led to believe. What's worse, perhaps? If the policy robbing Black saints of the blessings of the priesthood is any indication, the harm done by post-hoc theories justifying the unjustifiable will outlive the policy by decades—zombie doctrines unwilling to die, perpetuated by a Church unwilling to apologize.

3) This hastily written policy will continue to be a source of operational confusion unless and until the Church rescinds and/or rewrites the policy. As anyone who's ever been in a bishopric knows, letters of clarification fade quickly from memory—stuffed into the back of the battered old binder that holds the Handbooks of Instruction. If it's not printed in the Handbook, mentioned in the table of contents, and listed in the index, it's lost to the ages.

And, finally . . .

4) The policy is already driving away the tender-hearted among us. In the hours and days after the leak, I was sought out by countless

friends and acquaintances who needed someone to talk to—someone understanding, someone safe. I spoke to ward and stake leaders from my area, to children of General Authorities, to faithful Latter-day Saints of every stripe—each and every one in utter dismay. Some had asked to be released from callings, others turned down callings that had just been extended. One friend—the son of senior Church leadership—was being considered for a significant position in his area, and found himself praying for the call not to come. And then, on Sunday, December 13, 2015 at stake conference, my stake president held up a stack of white papers and commented that since November 5, 110 stake members had resigned. And for every one person I know who has resigned, I know ten who are on life support.

Praxis of Erasure

On February 23 of this year, Elder Bednar of the Quorum of the Twelve attended a regional meeting in Chile, where he participated in a question-and-answer session. One question in particular caught the world's attention: How can homosexual members of the church live (and remain steadfast) in the gospel?

Elder Bednar's response was somewhat lengthy, but led with this: "First, I want to change the question. There are no homosexual members of the Church." Elder Bednar continued: "We are not defined by sexual attraction. We are not defined by sexual behavior. We are sons and daughters of God. And all of us have different challenges in the flesh."² The rest of his response builds upon this premise. If you have a chance, I recommend listening to his answer in its entirety. As you consider his response, it's important to know that Elder Bednar has answered similar questions, in other settings, in much the same way.

2. "Preguntas y Respuestas con Elder Bednar 23 feb 2016 Area Sudamerica," YouTube video, retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jIwXMHZWgik>. The relevant section begins at 41:47.

I don't know his intent in building this wall where and how he did, but here's the bottom line: in those few moments, Elder Bednar effectively erased the lived experience of hundreds of thousands of members of the Church, a rhetorical sleight of hand that will only ever be used against queer members of the Church because other scenarios are "preposterous." Who, after all, would think to say that there were no Blacks in the church, or single people, or women . . . who, indeed?

Shifting Sands

So there's exclusion and erasure and then there is this curious tug-of-war that we see regarding the scope and shape of hope. It's a tug-of-war with several fronts:

1980

You're a seventeen-year-old young man who is attracted to other men your age. You've never acted on it. You've read President Spencer W. Kimball's *The Miracle of Forgiveness*, you've read Elder Packer's talk "To the One," and you've heard the snide remarks by the adults in your life, and it's perfectly clear: homosexuality is a sin next to murder. You've heard comments about tying a millstone around a sinner's neck as an act of blood atonement, and you've thought many times about ending it all. But against your better judgment, you decide to talk to your bishop. He's a great guy—a spiritual giant—who has been with you at every important intersection of your life. You want some guidance, some reason to live. Unbeknownst to you, a kid in the next stake over was just excommunicated for having just this type of conversation. But you luck out: your bishop sits you down, then he sits down behind his large desk, putting as much room between you and himself as politely possible. He then promises you that if you complete an honorable mission, return and marry a good girl, all will be forgiven. He reminds you that with God all things are possible—if you have faith.

2016

You're a seventeen-year-old young man who is attracted to other men your age. You've never acted on it. A few of your friends at school are out of the closet, and you're wondering whether you should come out yourself—and what your future might look like. On one hand, you've visited mormonsandgays.org, read every page, and watched every interview; you've heard President Uchtdorf's multiple calls for a large and inclusive approach to building the kingdom of God; you've heard about the gay-straight alliance at BYU; and you know the Church was active in passing statutes in Utah that protected LGBT persons from discrimination in housing and employment. On the other hand, you remember President Packer's talks, and Elder Oaks's, and President Nelson's; you've watched as the Church has called for the children of gay couples to be denied the blessings that you—a gay kid—have so richly cherished; and then you cringe as you watched Elder Bednar declare that there are no homosexuals in the Church. You know that this is something about yourself that will never change. Not in this life, at least.



In the first scenario, you have soul-damning condemnation of your very being coupled with a glib promise that you'll be cured as long as you toe the line and have faith—a festering heap of hurt iced over with empty promises and false hope. In the second scenario you have brief glimpses of radiant hope, obscured by constant, damning reminders of your place as a second-class citizen in the Kingdom of God. Sure you're welcome, but . . .

So, in the last three decades the Church has abandoned the carrot but kept the stick.

In Our Lovely *Oubliette*

Today, queer members like me, who remain, and queer children who have no choice in the matter are perpetual strangers in our own wards and homes: encouraged (or commanded) to stay, but otherwise told to bury our brightest emotions and sit out life's greatest moments—the walls of our faith shutting us up into well-furnished and cozy *oubliettes*.

What a haunting word, *oubliette*—French for “the forgotten place”—these small dungeons were meant as places to secret away troublesome enemies of the state. But look! Mine has a cozy chair, a small library, and large (but sturdy) windows. Outside, children play as if cheered on by the upbeat chords of Eliza R. Snow's “In Our Lovely Deseret,” which proclaims:

In our lovely Deseret,
Where the Saints of God have met,
There's a multitude of children all around.
They are generous and brave;
They have precious souls to save;
They must listen and obey the gospel's sound.

But through the thick glass, the music slows and strikes a minor key . . . and new lyrics speak to the irony of a Church that celebrates children and reveres the family, but willingly sacrifices so many of its children and families on the fires of Molech.

But I refuse to be forgotten, so I refuse to be silent. I work for that day the writer of Proverbs envisioned: “Hope deferred maketh the heart sick: but when the desire cometh, it is a tree of life” (Proverbs 13:12). A tree, which Nephi described as bearing the fruit of God's eternal love.

Thank you.



These remarks were given at the Mormon studies conference “Mormonism and the Art of Boundary Maintenance” at Utah Valley University on

April 13, 2016. In crafting my remarks, I focused almost entirely on the gay experience—because that is what I know best. And while I hope that my comments shed some light upon the experiences of the larger queer community, I understand that such comparisons can only go so far. Lesbians, trans persons, bisexuals will each have had different lived experiences, and queer persons of color, more different still.

Also, while I talk about the Policy of Exclusion in terms of how it plays out with regard to members of the queer community, it would be criminal if we forgot that it was modeled closely on the secret policy of exclusion targeting children of polygamist families. Let's not forget these innocent victims as we move toward undoing the damage wrought on November 5th.