

I AM NOT YOUR TRIGGER

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I feel the need to call attention to a pattern of destructive behavior that I believe needs to stop immediately. Like all destructive behavior, the only people we ultimately hurt with it is our ourselves. The one I want to talk about is labeling other individuals and their life paths as “triggering.”

Before I can fully address that, I feel I need to discuss a different but related damaging pattern in the Church, that I think is at the root of this other problem. I call this pattern of behavior FUBAR, because it messes up the gospel in a way that makes the gospel virtually impossible to recognize. FUBAR is a military acronym from the 1940s that means Effed Up Beyond All Recognition.

The pattern I’m referring to as FUBAR is when we tell people that there are a bunch of rules that they need to follow, and if they don’t follow these rules, they are damned. Then we hold up as examples people that we think are following the rules the way we think they need to be followed. And we shame people for not living up to that standard. That is not the gospel. That is a perversion of the gospel. That is a distortion of the Gospel that makes it virtually impossible to recognize the gospel for what it is. The gospel is, in case we need to name what it actually is, an invitation into a relationship with God where the only rule is to love him, love others, and love ourselves.

When we start to preach the FUBAR gospel, it creates hierarchies. It inculcates feelings of deep, fatal unworthiness. That’s actually what the gospel is supposed to free us from. But that’s what the FUBAR gospel does. It traumatizes us and makes us vulnerable. The FUBAR gospel enlists our own hearts and our own minds against us, making us our own worst haters and critics. This is not the gospel. Most of the trauma

(and the triggers related to that trauma) I've observed in the LGBT Mormon community are a result of this very anti-gospel, antithetical-to-the-gospel type of behavior that masquerades as the Gospel. Anybody calling themselves a disciple of Christ ought to be on the watch for this and name it and exorcize it the moment we see it.

OK, so let's talk about triggers. I have triggers. I'm pretty sure everybody has triggers. The important thing about triggers is owning them. My triggers are inside of me. They belong to me. I might be triggered by something that somebody else says or does, or even by some aspect or characteristic of somebody else. (The color of their hair? The timber of their voice? I was once told by somebody that I triggered him because I looked like his ex-boyfriend. OK, so what do I do with that?) I might be triggered by these things, but these things are not my trigger. My trigger is inside me. It is my own. And I do not ultimately help myself by externalizing it, by making my stuff somebody else's, by blaming somebody else for the fact that I am triggered. And if something that you say or do or are causes me to be triggered, it's not up to you to be less of who you are. It's up to me to do the soul work to figure out what is bothering me and why.

I would never deliberately try to trigger somebody else. That's just mean. That's bully behavior. And we certainly see a lot of that. Especially on the internet. But I want to say that situations that trigger me are actually some of the most important learning situations in my life. They become learning situations when I do the soul work that the triggering prompts me to do.

I learned a poignant lesson in how this can work just a few weeks ago. A little over a year ago, in March 2017, I attended the North Star conference and was present for a presentation by Bennett and Becky Borden, who are currently the president and a member of the board of North Star, respectively. Bennett and Becky told the story of how they were each led to end their respective same-sex marriages in order to marry each other. It's not the first time I've been exposed to a story

of this nature, so I had some mental space to process this. But I would be lying if I said it didn't push some of my buttons. At the end of the presentation, Bennett said something that I felt went over the top. It was something along the lines of, "So all of you out there who have given up hope that you could ever be in a happy marriage, there's still hope for you!" I rolled my eyes. I thought, this is exactly what LGBT/SSA Mormons, regardless of their path, shouldn't do. So that was one strike against the Bordens in my mind.

Later that afternoon, I had a chance encounter with them. They sat down at the table where I was eating lunch with a few other Affirmation leaders. They had no idea who I was, that I was the president of Affirmation and that I was soon to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of a very happy relationship with my husband. They were busy carrying on a conversation with friends, saying something to the effect of, "Oh, gay couples will tell you that they are happy in their relationships. But they aren't really. They don't really know how unhappy they are." I thought I had just heard them, on stage, proclaim their heterosexual marriage as attainable and emulatable for other gay folks. Now it wounded like they were telling people when I told people about the joy I have with my husband that I was either lying or deluded. I'm not a confrontational kind of guy. My inclination under the circumstances was to just listen and see how far they were willing to go with this and file it all for future reference. But a member of the Board of Affirmation who was present spoke up and said, "Well, this is John Gustav-Wrathall, the president of Affirmation. He and his husband have been together for twenty-five years, and they seem pretty happy to me. What do you have to say, John?" I awkwardly found the presence of mind to turn to Bennett and said, "Well, I usually wait until I know somebody well to have this kind of conversation. But, I suppose, if we must discuss this here and now. . . . Surely, you would acknowledge that your personal experience with a same-sex relationship was unique. Maybe your relationship was

unhappy, but surely you acknowledge that there may be others out there whose relationships are very happy.” Bennett responded simply, “No.”

If I hadn’t up until then, at that moment I had well and truly been triggered. I pretty much shut down. My focus turned to the food sitting in front of me, and that was the end of that conversation. That night I did not sleep. I tossed and turned and relived that conversation over and over and over in my mind, and felt more anguished and indignant with every turn. I finally gave up on trying to sleep at about two in the morning and got up and went to my computer. I began writing a letter to Bennett and to other leaders of North Star. You can imagine more or less the tenor of the letter. (It felt really good to get it off my chest!) I finally finished with the first rays of morning sunlight beginning to glimmer through the night shades. I was about to copy and paste it into an email, and then thought better of it. Instead, I sent a copy of the letter to my very patient and reasonable friend, Tom Christofferson. Tom, bless his heart, read the letter very quickly and thoroughly. He made some suggestions throughout, softening its tone. I knew Tom wasn’t about to get in the way of me saying what I thought I needed to say. He never suggested that I shouldn’t send it. But after reading Tom’s comments, and having time to cool off, I gradually came to the conclusion on my own that, while my feelings were eminently valid and reasonable, and while Bennett and others might even “need” to hear what I had to say on the subject, now was not the time nor this the method. I realized that if I did not have the confidence of my path in life without needing to defend myself in a verbal boxing match that may or may not prove a single damn thing, maybe I needed to be triggered.

If that were the end of the story, I wouldn’t be sharing it here. I was still left with a very sour taste in my mouth from this encounter. As I described it later to others who knew the Bordens, they generally expressed surprise. “That doesn’t sound like Becky or Bennett,” they would say. Well, I didn’t know what to say. When I heard later that Bennett was to become president of North Star, I decided that I really

needed to have a conversation with him, but I dreaded the idea of another encounter. I imagined his mental image of me was “the man who doesn’t know how truly unhappy he really is.” It wasn’t until I confided some of my concerns to mutual friend Ty Mansfield that it dawned on me how silly I was being. Ty and I have never agreed on everything, but we have let our mutual love of the Gospel become the common ground within which a very deep friendship has flourished, a friendship I cherish. I realized that with Ty I had been willing to overlook our differences so that we could become *friends*, and I ought to extend the same courtesy to the Bordens.

When I met the Bordens for lunch in March 2018, a year after the unfortunate lunch we shared at the North Star conference, I had a chance to share some of my story, which they received appreciatively. As I shared bits of my story and they shared bits of theirs, I found ample common ground, and found myself feeling increasingly grateful for their qualities as human beings. I began to see why others I’d spoken to who knew them spoke so highly of them.

At that lunch, we didn’t talk about that “close encounter of the third kind” (that encounter between two alien species) we’d experienced a year earlier. We certainly weren’t aliens to one another anymore. Initially I was content to let that bad first impression take its place within a more complex matrix of memories. But eventually I called Bennett and we talked about it. He apologized. He offered that he in fact couldn’t know how other people experience their relationships; that in fact relationships are unique and that same-sex relationships can be very, very good. More importantly, before he and I had that conversation, I had been able to let go of what I thought they might think about me, and hope that friendship could provide more opportunities for their image of me to be complicated, as it allowed my image of them to be complicated. And that is in fact what happened. And we are learning from each other.

The trauma experienced by LGBT Mormons is real. As we study and learn more about the extent and nature of that trauma, we’re learning

that it's severe and shouldn't be minimized or dismissed. It can even be life-threatening. The point is not that people should "just get over it." It's actually, rather, the opposite. It's that we need to take our healing seriously. We need to find our voice, yes. But in the process, we need to not reinjure one another. We need to not deny others the space that each of us needs to find our footing in life, even when the way they find and define that space looks alien and threatening to us.

Soul work is just that. It is work. Work is hard. And sometimes we're tired. If we are too tired to do the work, that is OK. If we're being triggered by a particular situation or person, it's OK to pull back. There's no shame in it. But be aware that if you are feeling triggered by a person, just because of who they are, or how they are, that is not their fault. It's OK to call somebody on bullying behavior. That's one thing. But it's not OK to label another person triggering.

One of the things that I love about being a Latter-day Saint is that I chose to be one. I am excommunicated, so I don't get any brownie points for studying the scriptures, for praying, for living the Word of Wisdom, for going to church on Sunday. I do all those things not so I can keep a temple recommend, not so I can please my husband or our son (who I think would find it an enormous relief if I would just let go of this Mormonism thing). I do these things for the connection I feel with God and with the Spirit as I do them. I embrace Mormonism because the doctrine and the teachings help me to understand my world a lot better. They help me to put the adversity I experience, including the adversity of homophobia, in perspective. Mormonism teaches me that I am made of the same stuff as God, and that there is a glorious future awaiting me, and all that is made possible by the struggles and the challenges and even the suffering that I experience in this life. My religion makes me happy. It makes me whole. And it roots me in a community! A community that is blessedly imperfect! A community that occasionally wounds me, and even triggers me! A community that

allows me ample opportunities to do the soul work that allows my God potential to shine through.

There's nothing about my path as a gay Mormon that I feel ashamed of, or that I see any reason to hide under a bushel. And if I am not going to be in the closet about being a gay man and loving another amazing, beautiful man who has been my life partner through the twenty-five best years of my life, I sure as *hell* am not going to go into the closet about being a Mormon. I sure as hell am not going into the closet about claiming any aspect of my faith as part of me and as part of my journey.

I am not your trigger. And I am not your role model either. Don't take my path as a sign that anything you are doing is inadequate or wrong. That's the FUBAR gospel. Just because I go to church doesn't mean you should be going to church. The only "should" in your life is what you are doing right now, which for the majority who are reading this who are LGBT, is probably not going to church. Unless you decide differently! And that's the whole point. It needs to come from within you, whatever you do. If there's any aspect of me that you want to take as a role model, let it be that. Not that I'm going to church! But that I've come to where I am today, to a place of profound peace and happiness, because I listened to my heart. Because I did what I knew I needed to do. I left the Church for nineteen years, and I did that because that was what was in my heart to do. And when I came back, it wasn't because I had some nagging sense that I'd been neglecting some duty for nineteen years. It's because I knew that that was the right thing for me to do here and now.

In terms of our relationship with the Church, in terms of our decisions about whether or how to be related to a significant other, you and I might be completely opposite of each other. But we could both equally be role models in our authenticity. Parenthetically, that's what I think is admirable, or praiseworthy, about Josh Weed. Not that he was in a mixed orientation marriage. Not that he's now chosen to end his marriage. Neither of those things did I ever see as praiseworthy in and

of themselves. But that he listens carefully to his heart, and he's willing to change course when that's where his heart leads. In that way, I want to be just like Josh when I grow up. This was part of the common ground I found in the personal connection I made with the Bordens too. I recognized in conversing with them that they too have been following their hearts, they too have been responding with integrity. They may have drawn some conclusions that don't fit with my experience. They may have even shared some of those conclusions in ways I found jarring. But I respect the integrity of the experience.

I frequently hear people say about LGBT Mormons who have shared their story things like, "I don't care what decisions he makes for his personal life, but he should just shut up about it. He shouldn't put himself out there as a role model." I've heard something along those lines about Josh, five years ago when he shared his experience of being married, and again recently when he shared their decision to get divorced. I've heard the same thing about Tom Christofferson, or Ty Mansfield, by folks who've left the Church. That was the filter through which I heard the Bordens share their story. I've heard it ad nauseum on the Church side about folks who have left the Church. "They leave the Church, but they can't leave it alone! And if they want to leave the Church, why don't they just leave and keep it to themselves?" That's bullying behavior. On both sides, that's bullying and that's shaming. That's telling people that they need to go into the closet about some aspect of themselves. They can't share their path or their journey with us.

Well, I reject that. I'm here to say that they can and should. I want to hear their stories, even (maybe especially) the ones that trigger me. Our stories are sacred! Our stories are our holy text; they are our scripture! There's no reason why we should be ashamed of our stories, and there's no reason why we should have to hide them under a bushel. There's no reason why we should protect others from our lives, from who we are. Let's protect that which is sacred within us! Let's protect and hold sacred our journey. And let's protect and hold sacred our triggers as well! That's

part of the path! Let's do the soul work that we need to do when we are able, and rest when we need to.

And if we can find it in our hearts to do this, to be authentic, to be fully who we are, without holding any of it back, and embrace others and support others in doing the same, no matter how different their individual choices and lives may look from ours, we will find the deepest and best possible kind of holy unity, happiness, and peace it is possible to find.

And at some point, we'll stop being triggered. We'll just be whole and happy in the divine intricacies of this sacred journey of life.