

ON THE VALUE OF DOUBT

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I start my talk with the tale of a young man who grew up in a house of faith but had serious doubts about what he had been taught. He did not believe what his religious authorities told him, or was at least profoundly uncertain about their teachings. In short, he was a doubter. Eventually his doubts became serious enough that he contemplated leaving the faith of his family.

If I asked you what you think of this young man and his struggles, I suspect that some of you would have sympathy for him, while others might wonder what sins he was hiding that would lead him to abandon the teachings of his youth. I think some of us would see his dalliance with disbelief as a dance with the devil. And that was, in fact, how his questioning was taken by many around him. When he confessed his doubts, many erstwhile friends turned their backs on him.

If I were to ask you how to counsel this young man, what would you tell him? Would he hear from you that he should put aside his doubts and trust what he had been taught? Would you tell him that Satan put the doubts in his mind and that his duty was to ignore them? Or would you discuss his concerns openly? Would you let your children associate with someone like him, or would you shun him?

This tale could describe many people we know in the Church, and almost invariably we interpret this story from the perspective that we have the truth and that doubting is a negative thing. But I would ask

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you to contemplate the individual in another light. As some of you may have guessed, this young man I have described is Joseph Smith, the founder of our religion, and the doubts I have described are what we see as his great act of faith. He was willing to question what he had been taught, and his doubts and questions concerning what he was told by the professors of religion are directly responsible for us being in this room today. From our perspective, Joseph hoped for things that were not seen but were true, but from the perspective of the preachers of the Second Great Awakening in the Burned-Over District, Joseph was someone whose doubts led to an outcome worthy of damnation.

I have met some people in my life who have seemingly had no doubts, and I envy their certainty, but I think most of us live in a liminal realm between certainty and despair, between light and dark. We have questions for which we do not find satisfactory answers, or we wonder if some parts of what we have been told are true. Some of us struggle to accept teachings or the history our faith. Others of us labor to make the transition from a conception of the gospel in which “Jesus wants us for a sunbeam” to a mature faith that can sustain us when we do not see rays of sunlight but instead perceive darkness all around us. We face the anguish of loss of loved ones, the collapse of cherished relationships, the dashing of hope, and we wonder if some deity really cares for us. Or we learn about things in our history that give us pause. Perhaps we discover that our leaders are humans like us, with strengths and weaknesses, and that our mythologizing of them is not exactly true or fair to them or to us.

In the course of my life, I have known too many people who, when they ask questions or express concerns, have been told that “that’s the devil speaking.” So they quietly bury these questions and pretend they don’t exist. They create doubts that they dare not name, and then those doubts hide in the dark and become malignant until they erupt forth and carry away all faith. These people need the freedom to ask questions without condemnation—as long as they are not using those questions

to harm others—and find answers. Because their doubts and concerns cannot be discussed, they transform into something destructive.

In my experience, there are doubts that lead to despair and the absence of hope and others that lead to greater maturity of faith and empathy for our brothers and sisters. When we mistake sincere questions for diabolical influence, we only help to ensure that they transform to darkness and disillusionment. But if we open up to questions and do not hide them, we create conditions in which mature faith can flourish. Even prophets in the scriptures have their moments of doubt, as when Elijah, fresh from his victory over the priests of Baal in which he called down fire from heaven, was driven into the wilderness and wondered why God had forsaken him. Lehi grumbled when things were not going well in the desert. I suspect Abraham's initial reaction to being told to sacrifice his son was probably incredulity. Or at least I hope it was, because if I thought God was telling me to kill my child, my first impulse would be to check myself into the psych ward. When Joseph went from the favored child of Jacob to being cast by his brothers into the pit, I imagine he had his moments of questioning as well. Sometimes our greatest faith comes when we act in spite of our doubts or when those doubts require moral courage to overcome.

I would also note that a healthy skepticism is an advantage in matters of religion as in other areas. We should ask ourselves *how* we know things we say we know. And if someone comes to us with extraordinary claims, we should have the wherewithal to ask for confirmation (something we would not do if we did not have doubts at some level). There are many wolves in sheep's clothing who would deceive us, and if we do not have a finely tuned baloney detector, we will be bamboozled. In other words, we need the ability to doubt and then move beyond to find truth. Otherwise, we find ourselves prey to any charlatan or confidence man who comes along. The problem of affinity fraud among Church members shows that our meters may at times be defective because we do not allow ourselves to doubt and question.

When I was a child in Alaska, a local woman in the Church started teaching her own views on the gospel. I think it started with no ill intent, but over time her claims became more grandiose, and she was not one to doubt herself. Others followed her, excited by things she said and the feeling that they were receiving special knowledge, but eventually she left the Church and took many with her. Here, a little skepticism would have helped those she led astray immensely.

For those of you who say that you have no doubts, I would argue that you do, but your doubts are aimed at things you *should* doubt. We are taught and observe many things that faith teaches us to doubt. Our experience tells us that people who die stay dead. It tells us that evil often wins and gets ahead in this world. It tells us that the universe is hostile and doesn't care about us. And it tells us that life isn't fair. But these are all things faith tells us are not true in the grand scheme of things, and so we doubt the evidence of our senses and what we can directly know.

Other times we make scientific or historical discoveries that bring into question things we thought we knew about the universe, and sometimes those things contradict teachings that we also thought were essential. If we are not prepared to doubt what we have received as truth, we risk spiritual stagnation and leave ourselves vulnerable to despair when circumstances change and we cannot reconcile our belief with new knowledge. In order to have faith, we must be able to doubt and question and have the strength to change and grow. In order to have humility, we must have faith strong enough to contemplate that we may be wrong about something and yet still go on. Every act of faith is a simultaneous act of doubt in whatever holds us back, a gamble that we can cast ourselves into the void, knowing we will fall and yet finding ourselves—to paraphrase Kierkegaard—resting transparently in the hand of God.

We cannot have faith—as the substance of things not seen that are true—unless we can question and doubt that what our senses and the voices around us tell us. But if we are to be appropriately skeptical, we

also need to, to quote President Uchtdorf, “doubt our doubts.” We need to be open and humble enough to admit we may be wrong. To use the framing of the great Elizabethan philosopher Francis Bacon, we need to avoid the “idols of our minds,” things we assume to be true because we think they are true without evidence.

We need to ask humbly for answers. We need to be honest with God about our questions and not hide them, thinking that admitting them will strike us down. We need to make them open to God and ourselves, even if not necessarily to everyone around us, so that we can address rather than hide them.

And when others find their doubts too much to bear, we need to respond with love and compassion, not with condemnation or with argument and confrontation. If friends have doubts, do not treat them as thralls to the devil. Instead, be open to the fact that all of us are at different points on our journey back home. Make our faith a beacon for what we wish to become and accept others in love and friendship, even if they question. If our children come to us with doubts, let them know that they are loved and discuss these things with them and talk about how you have faced them. And if their doubts concern things you don’t understand, find others who can help.

In closing, I mention something Brother Chye Teh in our ward once asked: Why, if we truly believe a testimony is something that is valuable, do we think we shouldn’t have to fight for it? Our doubts are the price we pay to find strength and testimony, not something to be ashamed of. They are what enable us to grow in capacity, love, and empathy.

In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

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