

To the 78 Percent

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Note: This sermon was given in the Coos Bay Ward, Coos Bay Oregon Stake, on July 31, 2011.

“Have you ever acted as though you had a testimony of something you were still unsure of at church? Maybe you found yourself hoping that if you played the role, it would eventually feel real? Or have you ever said you believed something that you didn’t have a testimony of because you knew it was expected of you, and you were surrounded by people that wouldn’t hesitate to confirm their own witness of the same subject? Is this being dishonest?”

This series of questions prefaces the results to a recent online survey of members of the LDS Church.¹ Revealingly, for the population polled—like most online surveys, the sample was self-selected, not random—78 percent of all respondents admitted that they had acted as if they had faith in something they actually did not or had said that they believed something when they actually doubted it. In other words, almost four out of five admitted that they had put on an act, for whatever reason, to give the appearance of undoubting, unwavering, unquestioning faith to their fellow ward members, even though they personally felt conflicted.

I see the results of this survey as both a comfort and a warning. First, it shows that we are a Church of human beings with an endless diversity of spiritual biographies. And second, it is a comfort because, though I was not one of the survey’s respondents, I am still one of those 78 percent. And before I had access to these results, I thought that I was part of an infinitesimally small minority—the minority of mask-wearing Mormons. I thought that I was the only one in the world who had ever had a hard question, who had ever had a single doubt. But now I know I am not alone, and it’s always a comfort to know you are not alone.

But as I said, these results are problematic, a warning. The

problem isn't that there are so many who apparently have doubts (I will deal with this fallacy later) but rather that there are so many people with questions that will never be asked and spiritual wounds that will never be healed with help from our ward brothers and sisters. The problem is the high percentage of respondents who indicated they were putting on a show of faithful perfection while suffering silently and in fear. It indicates that we do not encourage an atmosphere of complete spiritual honesty in our worship but value instead the tidy ease of conformity and the comforting façade of flawlessness. It indicates that many feel as if they will be rejected by their ward family if they do not answer every question the same way as everyone else. It indicates that, after baptism, many feel as if Mormons should never have any more hard questions to ask or that those questions even deserve an answer.

If the things I am saying are unrecognizable to your own experience, please understand that I am only explaining how it feels to be on one particular rock face of the spiritual climb. We're all working toward the summit, but we all have a different sort of mountain face to conquer. Perhaps you're a person who has never had a crisis of faith or never had your concept of God shaken to its core. Perhaps you are one who has been blessed with the spiritual gift of "exceedingly great faith" (Moro. 10:11), while others have been given different but equally valuable gifts. Take this discussion as an opportunity to understand where, most likely, a good number of your brothers and sisters currently stand in the church—as people who have questions and concerns that you have never had to confront. Take it as an opportunity to develop empathy.

To the whole congregation then, I ask you to consider: How would you have answered the survey question? Would you have said yes or no to the following, "Have you ever acted like or said that you believed or had faith in something you did not?" We won't really know how the results would turn out here in the Coos Bay Ward. But I think there is probably a good chance that at least one of you out there is someone like me, who has felt confused, alone, or even deeply wounded by an internal crisis of faith. To that probable person, I want you to know, I'm giving this talk to you.

I've often wondered why we, as Mormons, sometimes think that the scriptures are filled with stories of people who never had doubts. It seems as if we often jump into stories after the crisis has

passed and then pretend that it was the way things were the entire time. And then we insist that every major character in every story does the exact same thing. Forgive my literary allusion, but that would be like saying the entire story behind *Beauty and the Beast*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *The Help*, *Gulliver's Travels*, *War and Peace*, and *The Tao of Motorcycle Maintenance* all simply read, "And they lived happily ever after."

Take Abraham, for example. We often talk about Abraham as if he never questioned things—that he was so single-minded in his devotion to God that he was even willing to sacrifice his and Sarah's only child without batting an eye. But Abraham questioned and required an explanation for those questions many times. Abraham doubted that he and Sarah could have a child, questioned the necessity of circumcision, and debated with God about sparing Sodom and Gomorrah.

Or consider another paragon of unquestioning faith in our religion, Nephi. But Nephi doubted when asked to slay the evil Laban. He required an explanation to his questions from the Holy Spirit before he decided what to do. Nephi acknowledged that he must continue to ask questions because he realized he had gaps in his testimony. In his record of seeing his father's vision, an angel asked him whether he knew the condescension of God. He replied with a basic, grounding pillar of his own personal faith: that he knew that God loves all of His children. But then he continued: "Nevertheless, I do not know the meaning of all things" (1 Ne. 11:17).

The entire collection of Doctrine and Covenants is, from one perspective, simply a compilation of answers to questions and validations of doubts.

Or perhaps we could consider stories in the New Testament about the apostles and disciples. These were women and men who had already proven their faith and conviction to Jesus; but even after seeing miracles, Mary and Martha doubted that their brother could be raised from the dead. Peter, named because of his rocklike faith, faltered on the Sea of Galilee after he had already walked on water. Furthermore, this same Peter, who would become our organizational equivalent of a prophet, publicly denied his association with Christ three times. Then, there was the apostle Thomas who, even after his trusted friends insisted they

had seen Jesus resurrected, continued to doubt their testimony until he saw it himself. In modern rhetoric, his name has been used to denote a person who is spiritually weak, a “doubting Thomas,” but it’s an unfair accusation.

If we look at the character arcs of the grand majority of scriptural characters at our fingertips today, Thomas, Peter, Mary, and Martha are not anomalies of shameful doubt, but rather more the rule of humanity, examples of a process we all will, most likely, go through at some point in our lives. Some of us will have our questions answered directly; some of us might always live with uncertainty. But it is our nature to question; it is human to doubt. Perhaps I can even say that it is a spiritual responsibility to debate with God at times, to insist like Nephi on getting an explanation for why we are commanded to do something, or like Jacob to wrestle with an angel for our blessing.

Questions in the scriptures and in modern LDS theology are vehicles for personal growth and for institutional reform. Questions and doubts founded our church. If you know anything about Mormon history, you know that the young Joseph Smith was beset by questions about which church of his time was more correct than any other. He had a crisis of faith, confused as to what truth might be and where one would find it. And this crisis and its outcome eventually set his friends and community, sometimes violently, against him. But Joseph Smith was brave enough throughout his life to ask God his many questions with confidence and courage.

Questions and doubts will also always shape our doctrinal future. We describe our church as being one of continuing revelation; and if you study the scriptures, you quickly discover that revelations most often come as answers to questions men and women brought to God of their own volition. The message seems plain enough: to have continuing revelation, we have to be a church of continuing questions. If we ask questions, especially hard questions, it will be uncomfortable. It might be frightening. You may learn something that completely turns your world upside-down. But it will also mean growth, strength, a firmer rooting in what is truly important, and the assurance of continuing knowledge.

So, to the probable person out there who was part of that 78

percent, I hope you now realize that you have nothing to be ashamed of. You are going through a process, a very natural process of knowledge, that apostles and prophets have all experienced. You are asking hard questions in your own mind that have led you to need a greater explanation from God, an experience felt by Joseph Smith, Eve, Abraham, Mary, Hannah, Emma Hale Smith, Nephi, Sarah, Hagoth, Jacob, Peter, and billions of other women and men throughout the history of the world.

I've found the conference talk given by Elder Neil A. Andersen in October 2008 a comfort and something I have revisited often since it was given. He said: "Our spiritual journey is the process of a lifetime. We do not know everything in the beginning or even along the way. There are days when we feel inadequate and unprepared, when doubt and confusion enter our spirits, when we have difficulty finding our spiritual footing. . . . At times, the Lord's answer will be, 'You don't know everything, but you know enough.'"²

But I'm not sure if it is enough to simply tell you that what you're going through is normal and natural—even a beneficial and strengthening process. I want you to understand that I know this same process is never an easy one. Crises of faith can range on a wide spectrum, from a brief hiccup of discomfort to a deep gash-like wound that seems to refuse healing. I also want those who have never doubted to understand how difficult it can be—and how best to mourn with those of us who mourn our lost faith and comfort those of us who stand in need of comfort.

In my own case, I experienced something I can only describe as an earthquake. Knowledge and faith that I had previously held as sacred and indefatigable were not only challenged but, I felt, completely ripped from my soul. I have struggled to find words to describe how it cut me to those who could not understand my perspective. I've usually settled on saying I felt as if God had betrayed me—as if a person I had loved with all my heart and soul had slapped me across the face. I felt abandoned. I felt more alone than I had ever felt or ever thought I could feel. I pushed those I loved the most away from me, since in some way, they seemed to remind me of the pain I was feeling and I was indirectly afraid that they would also betray me in some way.

After some time, I felt strong enough to try and reach out to

others, looking for help to work through my questions. But it seemed that, at every turn, I was treated poorly. I was told that I was faithless. I was told that people with questions like mine did not belong in this church and that I should leave. I was told that I did not have any testimony at all simply because I doubted a single facet. I was told to pray harder, even though I had prayed harder than I thought was possible and received no answer to my questions. I was told to repent of things I had never done. Most gallingly, I was sometimes treated as a petulant and illogical child.

In short, I was rarely actually listened to and usually treated as a pariah. This experience quickly taught me to never talk to anyone about my pain and questions. It taught me that people would always judge me harshly rather than reach out to help me and validate the very real problems I had to deal with. But all I wanted was to find someone who would help those of us with spiritual burdens by being like good physicians and simply asking, “Where does it hurt?” Once people learn they can speak freely about their spiritual aches, we will be better able to sustain one another.

Eventually, I found a small group of people who were kind and understanding toward me, the kindest being my husband, Paul, who listened and loved me through everything. It was by him and through his unconditional love for me and the diamond-hard beliefs I still held to without wavering that I was shown again that God loves me.

Through time, through friendship, and through the love rather than the condemnation of others, I have finally come to a place where I feel safe and confident in my faith and my beliefs, even though those original doubts and crises have not been resolved. I feel comfortable in my liminal place in my spiritual climb, and I’m grateful that I have gone through and am still going through this crisis of faith. I know it has made me stronger. It has given me an unassailable testimony of things I now absolutely know to be true. Crises make you stronger, and my crisis was all internal. I may not look different to you all, but inside I feel as if I’m a redwood tree.

So, my 78 percent friend out there, it will get better. Find the people who love you for you and not for how well you conform. Be brave. Believe that God loves you, or believe that someday in the

future you will be able to believe that Heavenly Mother and Father love you. Be true to your truth.

To show you are not alone, I also want to read you some letters from people who love you and who understand. They are part of a community of Mormons across the country. I asked them what they would like to hear in a sacrament meeting talk about crises of faith. Here are their answers:

- As an audience member, I'd want to hear that crises of faith are normal, understandable, and not an indication of my worthiness or value as a person/member.
- So often when someone confesses a doubt, fear, or that they simply don't "get" something in the Church, gospel, or culture, the response is along the lines of "pray harder," as if the questioner is somehow broken or a part is missing. Nothing could be less helpful. Questions should be treated as an opportunity to learn more, enhance knowledge, and search for truth, not as a moral failing.
- Our faith was founded by a man who didn't "get" something and asked questions. And Joseph Smith was just one in a long line of prophets and other inspired people who experienced moments of crippling fear and ignorance. Even prophets have crises of faith; surely we're entitled to them too.
- I would make it clear that, if 400 people are in the meeting that day, there are 400 different levels of belief and understanding. I would want to make people feel empowered to talk and question and wonder.
- I would quote Canon Austin Farrer of the Church of England, who was quoted by Neal A. Maxwell in conference: "Rational argument does not create belief, but it maintains a climate in which belief may flourish."
- When someone brings up something that bothers them or that they don't understand, a common response is "X isn't essential to my salvation, so I don't worry about that." I would point out that X may not be a foundational principle of our faith, but it might still be very important or very troubling to someone, and the least we

can do is to acknowledge it, even if we don't have a good answer or explanation to offer.

- I would want to make sure the “non-doubters” understood that it's okay for others to have doubts. One of the things that drives me the craziest about experiencing a crisis of faith in the LDS Church is the extent to which the “non-doubters” make those who doubt feel broken and unworthy, or how they so glibly dismiss others' questions, or how they condescendingly remind those with questions of the party-line answers.

- We can't attain intelligence without asking questions. God most certainly wants us to ask questions: “Ask, and it shall be given to you” (Matt. 7:7). Yes, some things we learn may cause us to have a crisis of faith—not just in the gospel but in anything we have learned—but we should not fear those doubts. We do not have to embrace them, but we can learn more as we come through them, no matter where we end up when we are through.

I can't say much more than that—that we can learn more as we come through our questions and doubts, that they are part of a human experience, that we are all good people trying our best. Thank you all for your friendship, love, and support.

Notes

1. This was an online survey posted on the *Exponent II* blog on 17 July 2011. 157 people responded to the prompt: “Have you ever acted like or said that you believed in something you did not?” The paragraph quoted here is part of the introduction to the poll. In final results, 78% of respondents answered, “Yes,” 20% responded, “No” and 2% responded, “Other.” The author of the post writes under the pseudonym “Corktree.” “Poll: Honesty.” *The Exponent: Am I Not a Woman and a Sister?* Posted 17 July 2011, <http://www.the-exponent.com/2011/07/17/poll-honesty/> (accessed July 30, 2011). Probably, given the blog's usual audience, most of the respondents were women.

2. Neil L. Andersen, “You Know Enough,” *Ensign*, November 2008, <http://www.lds.org/general-conference/2008/10/you-know-enough?lang=eng> (accessed July 30, 2011).