

HUG A QUEER LATTER-DAY SAINT

Blaire Ostler

On general conference weekend a few of my queer friends and I stand at the southeast corner of the Conference Center and offer hugs to fellow Latter-day Saints as they pass. Dressed in my Sunday best, I hold a sign that says, “Hug a Queer Latter-day Saint” and wait for the hugs to come.

The purpose of this is not to discourage anyone from their faith. The purpose is to build bridges and extend an olive branch in the spirit of peace and healing. The aim is to increase the compassion and love between seemingly oppositional groups. I have found that a simple hug can be a powerful act of trust and charity for both parties.

I’ve hugged hundreds of people from all over the world over the years, and this is a short collection of memorable hugs that I jotted down in my journal. I have experienced such significant peace, joy, healing, and commiseration from these experiences that I wanted to share them with others. These hugs have helped heal me, and I’m hoping they will help heal you too.



A woman with two children approaches me in a bit of a rush. She has her hands full and obviously has no time to chitchat. Yet, she makes hugging me a priority. She hugs me without inhibition and says, “There ain’t nothing wrong with you, sweetie.” She and her children leave just as quickly as they came.



A gorgeous woman with dark espresso skin approaches me. As she gets closer, I can see she has a sleeping baby swaddled against her chest to

free both her arms. She is an experienced mother whose beauty and warmth radiates as she moves. She reaches out to hug me and says with an accent, “Hello. I am from Africa. In my country, we love all God’s children.”

We hug with her precious newborn nestled between us. The scent of her newborn baby reminds me of the truthfulness of her words. We are all God’s children.



I hug a stylish bisexual woman who enthusiastically tells me, “I’m so happy you’re doing this! I’m one of you! I’m not really ‘out’ yet because I’m going on a mission soon. They are going to have to deal with us sooner or later. I hope you get lots of hugs today!”

She quickly moves along and heads into the Conference Center with her spiral notebook and pen. I get the distinct impression she is an avid notetaker and has plans of her own to fulfill.

I smile at the thought of bisexual missionaries serving in the field. She has her work to do and I have mine. I whisper to myself as she walks into the Conference Center, “Godspeed.”



I hug a man who asks me if I have “boy and girl parts,” which leads to a lengthy discussion about accurate terminology. All things considered, he receives the first queer discussion quite well.



A young man and his girlfriend approach me warmly and give me a hug. They don’t leave, though. The young man has about a thousand questions on his mind and asks me if I could discuss them with him. I answer, “Of course, that is what I’m here for.”

After he finishes asking me his questions he says, “I could be wrong about this, but you tell me what you think. I feel like the younger

generations, like us, are ready for new revelation. I don't have a problem with gay people. I'd be totally happy if they could be sealed in the temple. Sometimes it feels like people are just waiting around to be told how to love each other. Sometimes it feels like we're just waiting around for the brethren to tell us what to do. Am I wrong in saying that?"

I smile and assure him, "I have felt many of those feelings myself. I don't think you're wrong for thinking that."

He looks relieved to know he isn't the only one eager for more from his religion.



An old man, roughly in his eighties, is working as a conference usher. He slowly walks toward us with an official badge on his jacket. I assume he's going to ask us to leave. Instead he says, "I love you. I don't know how this is all going to work out, but I love you. Keep doing what you're doing."

He hugs me so tightly that it seems he has no inhibition about hugging a queer woman. I am just another child of God to him. I nearly cry as he slowly walks back into the Conference Center.



A man in a hurry rushes past me. He bumps my shoulder and turns and says, "Oh! Sorry."

He sees my sign and his demeanor changes. He smiles and says, "Hey! My daughter is queer!"

He hugs me like a father longing to hug his queer daughter, just before hurrying away into the Conference Center. He calls back, "Thank you for all you do!"

I smile.



One woman has tears in her eyes before she even has a chance to hug me. She comes out of the Sunday afternoon session visibly distraught. She throws her arms around me and cries softly on my shoulder. She tells me in broken English, “My son is gay and has left the Church. I love my *iglesia* and I love my son. I don’t know what to do.”

I have no words of comfort. I hold her a little longer as she cries and tell her, “It’s okay to cry. I’m a mother too.”



A man and his son, a BYU student, give me a hug. The father looks around as if he’s about to tell me something he shouldn’t. He leans in, glances over his shoulder, and says, “These things take time. Try to be patient with the knuckleheads who just don’t get it yet.”

I grin from ear to ear and assure him, “I’ll do my best.”

He and his son leave and go into the priesthood session.



A Church security officer makes his way toward us. He asks, “How is everything going here? Are people being nice to you?”

I cautiously respond, “For the most part, yes. You can tell there are many people uncomfortable with our signs, but no one has been overtly unkind.”

He nods his head and says, “That’s good. Just wanted to make sure folks weren’t being mean to you. I’ll be over here if you need anything.”

I don’t get a hug, but the encounter still makes me smile. I wouldn’t be surprised if he gives me a hug in six months at the next General Conference. These things can’t be rushed.



A guy hugs me with surprising intensity. He pulls back and says, “I’m sorry. You don’t know me, but my wife loves your work. She’s bi and she

was afraid to come out while being married to a guy. She didn't think anyone would believe her."

I respond, "I'm so glad my work has been helpful!"

He assures me, "Oh, it has. More than you know."



I've been standing at the southeast corner of the Conference Center long enough to lose track of the time. I haven't eaten anything since breakfast. It's just before two and my stomach is growling. I look to my right to see a large man with white hair walking toward me with a plate of chocolate chip cookies. He asks me, "Would you and your friends like some cookies? They're homemade."

I too eagerly reply, "Yes!" He smiles, hands me the cookies, and is off on his way. I don't get a hug, but I am still grateful for his kindness.



A woman in her eighties approaches us slowly with her walker. She's looking directly at me as she carefully makes her way over. She smiles and gives me a big, warm hug.

She says, "Darling, I have something to tell you. I don't think there is anything wrong with you."

I reply warmly, "Well, thank you very much. I appreciate that."

She looks dissatisfied and continues, "But it hurts my feelings you callin' yourself queer. There is nothing wrong with you. You don't need to call yourself that."

I smile and respond, "That's understandable why you would feel that way and I genuinely appreciate you looking out for me. I agree that there is nothing wrong with me. In the past, the word 'queer' was used as an insult, but I don't find my queerness insulting. I'm queer and there is nothing wrong with me. Anyone can call me queer and I take it as a compliment."

She looks at me as if I don't understand her and continues, "But there's nothing wrong with you. You're a lovely girl."

Her husband, who has been standing next to us listening intently, chimes in, "That's what she's trying to tell you, dear. There's nothing wrong with her AND she's a queer."

He turns to me, gives me a big hug, and says, "We're here to support you and we love the queers. And we're happy to call you a queer if that's what you like."

I give the woman another hug and thank her again for being concerned with my welfare. They slowly make their way across the street, and I can hear them chatting with each other.

"I just don't understand why her sign says 'queer.'"

"That's what I'm telling you. Being a queer isn't bad anymore."

They remind me of my own grandparents, and I smile at their willingness to understand that "Being a queer isn't bad anymore."



A beautiful woman with copper skin and long black hair hugs me and smiles. Around her neck is a turquoise necklace and I wonder if she is indigenous. Before I can ask, she says with peace and wisdom, "I wanted to tell you that I'm indigenous and a member of the Church. In my culture, we are encouraged to learn from the queer members of our tribe. Don't stop teaching. That is why you are here."



A young woman in her twenties is visibly upset as she exits the Conference Center. Her eyes are red and wet. She walks over to me and throws her arms around me. I can feel her body shaking as she fights back tears. She tries to speak but is too flustered to manage a complete sentence, so I hold her until she decides to let go. She pulls away and says, "Keep

doing this. You are so brave. I don't think I could be that brave. Please, keep doing this."

I assure her, "I will do my best."

She pulls back and disappears into the crowded sidewalk. She never told me why she was crying.



A woman with tan skin approaches me with a radiant smile. She can barely speak English but is eager to communicate with me. With her delightful enthusiasm and Portuguese accent, I can understand her saying, "Your sign. It means you hug! Yes?"

I match her enthusiasm and reply, "Yes! Hugs!"

Just when I think her smile couldn't get any bigger, she widens her grin and embraces me with full force. She pulls back and says, "Oh, thank you! I am from Brazil and we love hugs! This is my first time in your country."

I respond, "In that case, welcome to America!" I wish I could speak Portuguese to greet her in her own language, but it appears we both speak the language of hugs and that is enough.



Just as I think the day is over, a mother and her three-year-old daughter come over and hug me. The little girl points to my sign and says, "I like your rainbows. What does it say?"

I crouch down to my knees so we are at eye level as I read her the sign: "Hug a Queer Latter-day Saint."

She asks, "What does that mean?"

I feel like a Primary president again talking with one of our little Sunbeams. I explain to her, "It means that Jesus taught us no matter how different we are we always need to love each other. That's why

I used rainbow letters. When I see rainbows, I am reminded of how important it is to love one another.”

She smiles. Her mother approves and says to her, “That’s right. We love all people.”

Her mother gives me another hug and says, “Thank you. All God’s children need to feel loved.”

BLAIRE OSTLER is a philosopher who specializes in queer studies and is a leading voice at the intersection of queer, Mormon, and transhumanist thought. She is an author publishing her first book, *Queer Mormon Theology*. She is a board member of the Mormon Transhumanist Association, the Christian Transhumanist Association, and *Sunstone*. Blaire is also an artist and poet who blogs at BlairOstler.com.