

THE COMPLEMENTARITY PRINCIPLE

Lisa Poulson

In 2008, I turned forty-five, Wall Street collapsed, California voters banned gay marriage, and I lost my virginity.

The financial system's meltdown changed the air I breathed, in the same way fire distributes ash for hundreds of miles. My financial foundation was at risk, but it was my people attacking the benignly beautiful institution of marriage that really broke apart the ground on which I stood that September.

I'm a lifelong member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. My family has been in the Church almost since it was formed in the 1830s, but we didn't live in Utah. We lived in Los Angeles, soaking in what cities have to offer. Half of my heart was embedded in my religion and culture, the other half swelling with love for the wider world and the people in it.

In 2008, my church heavily promoted California's Proposition 8, the ballot measure opposing gay marriage. Our conservative religion is dogmatic about defining marriage as only between one man and one woman. If Prop 8 passed, thousands of loving couples would lose their dream of marriage. I was devastated to watch my co-religionists lobby in opposition to a couple's right to celebrate and solemnize their love.

My empathy ran deep. From the time I was thirteen, my romantic aspirations bounced like a ball in a pachinko machine getting tossed from side to side without ever finding its way down any of the chutes.

I didn't have a boyfriend in high school. I spent ninety percent of my time with my public school friends who were not Mormon, but I was undesirable because I would not have sex outside of marriage. The prospect of betraying my parents and my God felt as risky as tipping

backwards off of a high dive without checking to see if the pool was filled.

Besides, I'd seen what sex did to my friends and it frightened me; one friend who got pregnant shoved her belly into the corner of her parents' dining room sideboard until she hemorrhaged. Saying "No" felt safe. At least I knew what would happen when I said no: nothing. Nothing was a comfortable void. Nothing was predictable. Nothing contained no risk. So, I didn't have sex in high school.

Nor did I have boyfriends during my four years at Brigham Young University. Somehow I never could be what Mormon boys wanted. I was that odd girl from LA lying on my dorm room bed alternately reading *Vogue* or H. L. Mencken, making cynical remarks. I showed up for church the first Sunday as a freshman wearing a dark green silk blouse, a pencil skirt, and pumps—a dark orchid in a basket of My Little Ponies. I was absolutely *not* proper Mormon wife material.

I had no capacity to soothe and encourage these boys into considering a life with me. Even as a little girl there was a bag of bees and lit candles and delicate eggs and crystalline jewels and razor-sharp knives and mud-caked horse hooves crashing around inside of me—I had no idea what to do with all of that energy and neither did they.

My father, a lawyer who was raised by a rare woman who had a career, encouraged my intellectual energy in fierce dinner table debates. It never occurred to me that my quick and incisive mind might repel the boys I met at church. On the other hand, Dad was perpetually concerned about my appearance (especially my weight), because the most attractive women attracted the highest-quality husbands. He was anxious to see me well settled in life.

I had no luck fulfilling his wishes. The girls who dated the most at BYU were sweet and pious. The boys wanted girls who would keep them on the straight and narrow path, who'd be wonderful mothers, who'd create nurturing homes. Once they found each other, couples often dated for just a few months before deciding to wed.

Part of me secretly hoped to someday meet a kind, worldly Mormon man who'd love me the way I was. Furtively, I'd scan the crowds of boys and see if there were any likely prospects. There weren't.

If I had been able to make myself attractive to the boys at church, I would have married during or shortly after college. I would have raised a family. I would have said yes in the appropriate way, at the appropriate times. But I didn't, because no one asked.



Life made demands as graduation loomed. What was a single girl to do? And where? I chose New York.

I arrived in Manhattan in October 1984, carrying my secret naivete and the scale Dad sent me as a housewarming gift. Lacking any experience with men, I convinced myself that I could learn to be sophisticated about other things—the way the world worked, the arts. I worked in the art world, then Wall Street, and finally found a home in public relations. I made great friends at work and at church—friends, not boyfriends.

As I built my life in New York City, my veins filled with loneliness and confusion. My encounters with men were awkward mishaps. Once I invited a young man up to my apartment after dinner with no idea that I was implying another invitation. We sat down. He kissed me. He kept pushing me down and sliding on top of me. After I had wriggled out from under him three times, he just got up and left.

True to the pattern, the boys at church in New York didn't see me as wife material any more than the boys at BYU had. I watched my friends at church pair off and get married. I swallowed the pain of knowing no Mormon man would propose to me.

Wouldn't it have been easier to find a man to love if I had just relaxed the rules a bit? Almost surely. But I did not know how to turn my back on my religion, which inculcated in me from birth a vocabulary for the divine that suffuses every cell in my body. In my body there is a triple,

not a double, helix. I have another strand on my DNA, encoded with a profound and unbreakable love of God. And my God, my church leaders, and my parents intended for me to marry within the Church.

Even if it was impossible to find a Mormon man who might love me, a life with someone outside of the Church was untenable. How could I expect a man to happily support a partner practicing a strange American religion that requires daily attention?

So, while I dallied with several men I met outside of the Church, I never contemplated a real relationship with any of them. The distance between their worlds and mine was too far to span.

Even so, I wanted to love God in my way—as myself—without becoming a cookie-cutter Mormon girl. If I had to do it alone, so be it. I embraced my independence with as much grace and fortitude as I could muster. I could, *and would*, create a lovely life on my own. I tried to will the desire for real love away, but within my heart remained a tiny, unquenchably hopeful flame.



One warm and still summer evening in 1992, after I'd been in New York for eight years as a single woman and had created my life and a career in public relations, I was walking up Broadway with one of my church friends.

“Could you ever see yourself being with a man who isn't rich? Maybe a man who is athletic and literary and has a career in the military, and when he retires wants to be an English teacher?” she asked.

“Well, I guess so,” I said. Even though I was always going around saying I wouldn't ever marry a man who didn't own his own tuxedo, I didn't want to seem shallow—to her or to myself.

Several weeks later, on Labor Day weekend, she asked if I was free that night. “My brother-in-law is going to be there, and I'd love for you to meet him.” What? Had those questions she'd asked before been about an actual human?

The idea of a date filled me with anxiety because I almost never went on proper “dates.” Casual hanging out and fooling around, sure. But not “dates.”

The thought of a date with a Mormon was like rubbing sandpaper on my eyeball—I knew exactly what they thought of me. I had been on four dates with Mormons in my life, and none of them had gone well. The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. My dignity was at stake! I said no. But she persisted—her brother-in-law lived in California and was only in town for a week. Finally, I reluctantly agreed. How much could a person who lived on the other side of the country impact my life?

That night as I was getting ready, I felt awkward and prickly. The last thing I wanted to do was look eager, so I wore a baseball hat and almost no makeup. No Mormon man was going to think I was anxious to please and be evaluated by him!

Six of us (my friend and her husband, another couple we knew, the brother-in-law, and me) went off to play minigolf at a pop-up course in a warehouse in Soho. Marc, my date, took the game seriously, which I thought was hilarious. After golf, we all went to hit softballs at batting cages. I noticed him as he hit the seventy-miles-per-hour fastballs with ease, and caught him noticing me as I whomped the fifty-miles-per-hour softballs. I acted like I didn’t see him watching me, but I hit the next balls even harder. We then all went to play pool, where I unspooled a bit and flirted with him a little, which felt like harmless fun.

The next day at church, my friend was anxious for my reaction. Did I want to see him again? She told me Marc had said I had a luscious look. That adjective sounded delicious to me.

“Yes, I’d be happy to see him again.”

On our second date, late in the evening, wrapped up together on my sofa, Marc asked if he could ask me a question. He surprised me when he quietly, carefully, and very sincerely said, “Why haven’t you been to the temple?” I was stunned—there was no more personal question a person could ask me, and no more painful a topic. I knew that Marc,

who had been married before, had been to the temple. Nearly all of my church friends my age had.

I had never entered a temple and had no plans to go because I *knew* I could never be the right kind of Mormon woman. I had never wanted to have children, which was supposed to be my greatest desire. I had a casual relationship to the Church's law of chastity—I didn't have sex, but I felt perfectly fine doing whatever else as long as I remained a virgin. I was short-tempered, selfish, and self-indulgent. I didn't even bake!

I stared up at his calm and quiet blue eyes and thought, in this order:

1. How can I tell him the truth?
2. I've never talked about this with anybody.
3. Well, this is a leap-of-faith situation.

I said, "Do you want the real answer or the published answer?"

He said, still very quietly, "The real answer if you want to tell me."

I have no idea what compelled me to even consider telling him the truth. I just looked at him and something nudged me to take that leap.

I said that I had never felt like a proper Mormon woman, that I never thought I could be, that I couldn't sacrifice my identity to go to the temple. When I finished, I braced myself for criticism or a patronizing lecture, which is what I was used to getting from men at church.

But he simply leaned over, kissed me on the forehead, and said, "Thank you for telling me." That was all. He proffered no advice. He did not presume to judge me.

I had never had a man listen to something I said and respond simply by saying thank you. But I handed this man the delicate and sheltered center of my soul. He quietly held it.

My mind raced as I stared up at him, stupefied. *Who was this person with me? How was it possible that he existed and that he was in my living room?*

In those few moments of suspended and magical silence, my whole life changed.

We spent the rest of the week together, each in awe of what was happening between us, barely able to speak of it. We couldn't admit to ourselves, or to each other, that we fell in love that week.

Eventually, though, on the phone, we spoke the words. And we began the work of creating a real relationship. It wasn't easy. Marc lived three thousand miles away in Eureka, California. (He was a helicopter pilot in the Coast Guard.) Even more importantly, he was in the middle of a painful divorce, which felt both abstract and weighty to me. We began with letters (because this was before ubiquitous internet email), long phone calls, and a few sublime visits. Finally, the Coast Guard transferred him to Brooklyn.

Nearly a year after we met, Marc proposed.

Knowing that I was going to be married, and married to a Mormon, was a sensation not unlike finding a cache of diamonds hidden inside the radiator. I felt stunned; nothing more implausible could be imagined. Was I actually going to be a "normal" married Mormon woman *on my terms*? Loved and celebrated by a remarkable man simply for being utterly myself? I felt enormously lucky, drowned in the beauty of it all. I wandered around in a daze at church, where I'd soon be part of the large tribe of other married couples.

Even more importantly, for the first time, I felt that perhaps God actually understood me. I wouldn't have received a gift like this perfect-for-me man if God disapproved of me. Having the miracle of Marc in my life made me start to feel, moment by moment, that perhaps God truly knew me and also loved me just the way I was. I started to breathe in a different way; every molecule in my body filled with optimism and possibility. At the age of thirty, I became acquainted with hope.

Two weeks later, on the morning of August 31, 1993, I was sitting at my desk doing what PR girls do. I was calling reporters to book a media tour for a client. When the phone rang, I was a little surprised, because journalists rarely call you back. But it wasn't a journalist. It was Marc's brother. He'd never called me at the office before.

“Marc’s been in an accident.”

Adrenaline shot my eyes wide open. My brain zeroed in with that still, numb focus of fear. I never really thought of Marc’s job as dangerous. He was disciplined and cautious. The idea of him getting injured had never crossed my mind.

“Do you want to come to the hospital?”

No more details were offered. One thing was clear—Marc wasn’t capable of calling me himself.

When I put the receiver down, I forced my mind to focus. Speculating wasn’t productive. What mattered was what to do next.

My boss arranged for a town car to take me from Manhattan to coastal New Jersey—a two-hour drive. When I got to the hospital, Marc’s family, Coast Guard representatives, and hospital staff were assembled in a small waiting room. They handed me his wallet, watch, and dog tags.

We learned that Marc’s helicopter had overturned after hitting the railing of a lighthouse. It plunged about seventy feet down into the water below, where it smacked hard on the surface. Marc and the other pilot floated in the upside-down helicopter, unconscious, with their heads submerged in water for several minutes. The other pilot was never revived. Marc’s heart was restarted by New York City police divers, who were the first on the scene.

When we went into the ICU, I didn’t recognize the banged and bashed figure in the bed. Marc was in a coma and on a respirator. My breathing slowed and my eyes widened to take in the horrific scene before me. Marc’s head was the size of a pumpkin—nearly unrecognizable. He was swollen, bloodied, and covered in IVs.

But then I saw his hands. Those were the hands I knew. After a moment, in that swollen face, I saw his eyelashes—the only part of his face unchanged by the trauma.

He never woke from his coma. He died four days later, 364 days after we first met.



Marc and I never had sex. We were waiting until we got married because that is what observant Mormons do.

When he died, the fragile, nascent hope that had just begun to flow into my heart turned to ash. It stopped my heart, filled my lungs and my eyes, and drowned me more thoroughly than any ocean ever could have. Marc was the only person who'd ever seen and delighted in all of me—my tender and pure-hearted Mormon side and my fiercely independent *I'd-rather-have-a-career-and-soak-up-every-bit-of-beauty-in-New-York-than-have-children* side.

The certainty of his durable and miraculous love had just begun to seep into my consciousness, to change the way I saw the world, to reorder my very bone marrow. That love changed the way I saw myself and the way I saw God.

In the weeks and months after his death, my grief came in molten, furiously propelled waves. The hot density of it would flow in, drowning my senses and my capacity to reason. Sometimes it came in the morning when I woke and realized anew that he was gone. Sometimes it seized me in the afternoon at work, or in a restaurant, or on the train. When these waves overtook me, my mind and senses would desert me as the heat rose from my gut and my heart. I couldn't hear what people were saying, comprehend time, or speak. The grief would growl and stretch, enveloping my whole body and subsuming my brain. I would shake, or sweat, or cry, or all of the above when it had possession of me.

Over time I learned to be still, to breathe deeply and to let it run through me. Fighting it never did any good. Nothing was stronger than this sensation. I would hold onto the doorway or the side of a building and wait for it to finish with me. It was my first practice in surrender.

Eventually, as I grew accustomed to the grief, my mind started to reboot, to examine my experience. I saw that death is insulting and shocking. It doesn't negotiate. It doesn't ask. Death feels no consideration. Death takes. Death doesn't give a damn about what the taking does to you. Death is brutal in its callous disregard, its intransigence. Death will not change its mind and give you back your loved one.

Nothing and no one in my life had ever treated me this way. There was always something that could be done with ingenuity, patience, or charm. Not this time. Death slapped me across the face, pushed me down, kicked me in the stomach, and then rode away without a backward glance.

People talk about a broken heart, but that's not what it was. Grief had torn my heart out of my chest, thrown it down on a marble slab, taken one of those four-pronged gardening tools and whacked at it over and over again, shredding it into a pulp. I was drowning in the blood and tears of my decimated heart.

It surprised me that in my grief I turned, wholly and deeply, to God. Plaintive prayer was my only option when I woke in the middle of the night, unable to breathe. I filtered nothing when I talked to God. He heard all of my anger, my fear, my hopeless desperation. I gave it all to him because there was no human alive who could have received it. And, without fail, whenever I gave in to despair, light and comfort came to me. I was seen and held in a celestial embrace until I could find the courage to go on. My relationship with God became an unshakable, immediate, essential part of my life.

Several weeks after Marc died, I decided to go to the temple. Being there made me feel closer to God, to the things of eternity. The place I had wanted nothing to do with for thirty years became the safest and most beautiful place in my world.



The intervening years were full of anger, struggle, joy, insight, tedium, perseverance, and everything it means to be human. In 1995, I moved from New York to Silicon Valley, getting deeply immersed in the first internet boom. I grew sophisticated, weary, and irritable. I sank excessive energy into jewelry, handbags, and maintaining my porcelain skin and long dark hair that Marc had loved so much.

My frustrations with the Church peaked and ebbed. Eventually, I rebelled. God had taken away the man I loved, so I got involved in more than one questionable relationship. I still went to church every Sunday, but I rarely went to the temple because I was so close to the edge of the Church's chastity rules. Still, I kept one last gate closed—I did not have sex.



In April 2008, I turned forty-five. Four months later, in August, was the fifteenth anniversary of Marc's accident. That night I lay staring at the dark ceiling with grief and tears welling up. I had known and loved a man who had loved me so deeply in return, who made it clear that our relationship was the most important thing in his life. That was my past. What on earth was my future?

I knew the chance of finding love like that again was remote. Marc was the only Mormon man who had ever seen and loved all of me. That lightning was not going to strike again. And what man outside the Church would want a relationship without sex before marriage? I felt like a real estate agent trying to sell an unusual property. "It's a great house—fantastic layout, beautiful kitchen, gorgeous architectural details, amazing backyard, great location. It just doesn't have any bathrooms. That's OK, though, isn't it? Don't you want to buy it?"

Sometime after 2:00 a.m., I stared at the ceiling and spoke through it, out loud, to God, and to Marc. "Please. All I want is for some man somewhere to find me attractive. That would be enough!"

The following weekend I had a wedding to go to, so I booked a blowout. As the stylist washed my hair, he complimented my makeup. I've had so many conversations with stylists in San Francisco—what's the best adhesive for glitter eyeshadow, where to buy great false eyelashes, etc.

There was lots of amiable chatter as he dried my hair. We talked about how neither of us drank. I complimented his tattoos. Was I going on my own to the wedding? Yes, I was.

The conversation veered to my love life, and I felt comfortable enough with this chill and accessible guy to complain about the indifferent man I was sort of seeing—always happy to dish about my love life with gay men. “I mean, he can’t even get himself over to my apartment to fool around with no strings attached? It’s just demoralizing.”

He commiserated with me by saying something about the women in his life.

“You’re *not* gay?” I was stupefied.

“Nope. I’m not.”

I couldn’t take back my indiscretion, so I gathered myself and we moved on.

When he finished my hair, he fluffed it up around my face, stared into my eyes in the mirror, and said, “You are gorgeous.” I took those lovely words in like drops of honeysuckle nectar and thought, *There, God, thank you. That is the answer to my prayer.*

I went off to the wedding with my excellent hair and makeup in a pair of bubble gum pink Louboutins, looking chic enough that no one would need to feel sorry for me for being there alone.

Still, I snuck out as soon as the cake was served. Going alone to a wedding requires a ton of social stamina, and mine wears off by the time everyone is drunk and dancing. Walking out to my car, I saw I had a voice mail. It was the stylist. “I don’t normally do this, but I wondered if you’d like to have tea some time.”

With a little frisson running up my spine, I called back and got his voice mail.

During the hour it took to drive home to San Francisco, I felt like my blood and my brain were carbonated. It was hard to concentrate on anything but that sensation in my body.

Two hours after I got home, I was still too keyed up to sleep. I read a whole issue of the *New Yorker*. I was about to give up when he finally called.

Him: “Would you like to get together sometime?”

Me: "Sure. When would be good?"

Him: "How about now?"

Me (no pause): "Who's getting in the car?"

Him: "I am. Text me your address."

He was mellow and easy, standing in my kitchen doorway as I started to fumble at making chamomile tea. My hands were shaking too much to open the box. After about forty-five seconds of pretending to be calm, I walked over to him and said, "Could you please just kiss me now so I can get over my nervous anticipation and get back to making the tea?"

He did. And, for no other reason than instinct, that night I said yes. I finally lost my virginity. At forty-five. To a man I met that morning. It was not a decision I deliberated. It was a decision I felt. It felt entirely inevitable and entirely right.

Being with him took all the sophistication out of my persona. I could not imagine a more vulnerable experience. It was all metaphor. It was all fact. It was all meaning. It was all sensation. All at once. I had acted out the most basic ritual of yin and yang for the first time. It was intensely symbolic and more immediate than any experience in my life.

I thought I knew my way around men, but this was wholly new. There was so much information and sensation to take in, both with him and after he left late that night. I was used to an overloaded mind. A few times in my life my body had been awash with overwhelming sensation. But this consumed my whole body and my whole mind all at once.

What I had done that night made me ineligible to go the temple. For fifteen years I had hewed to the edge of my church's chastity rules rather than dive into the carnival of men and sexuality. This one time I made a different choice. It felt like the right choice.

I saw the stylist a second time—a couple of weeks after our first night together. If I were finally going to bring sex into my life, I needed a teacher. I imagined we'd continue seeing each other, and I'd continue

learning about sex and myself. I would face the consequences at church some other time.

A couple of weeks later, recently home from a business trip, I called and left a message saying I was ready for my next lesson if he was free.

It took him about ten days to return my call. Every day I waited I felt like an abandoned helium balloon that floated farther and farther away from the hand of the child that held it. By the time he did call, that balloon had been swallowed by the atmosphere. We had a polite conversation about current events and the weather. It took me just seconds to realize that he wasn't interested in seeing me again. I was self-possessed enough to breezily say goodbye. And that was that.

But that wasn't that. My body fell into a wordless, primal grief. It wasn't the all-encompassing pain of losing Marc. I barely knew this man. But the serotonin that had bathed each of my cells in beautiful warmth dried up and faded away and I would find myself in a fetal position on my bed, still in my work clothes and shoes, staring at my bedroom wall. I knew it was just chemical, but that didn't make the misery feel any less real.

As my capacity to reason returned, I knew I could not deal with aftermath like this again, no matter how ravishing sex might prove to be. I had a life to live. This type of crisis was unacceptable. So I made the only choice that felt safe—no more casual sex for me. I am too delicate to endure it. I squashed that fresh, tiny blossom of sexual identity that he planted in me before it could take root.

That next Sunday at church drove the wedge between my religion and me even deeper.

“For anyone who would like to go hang door tags in San Mateo County this weekend, we will have a bus leaving the church on Saturday at 9:00 a.m.”

On that sunny Sunday morning in October, there were about fifty women sitting on folding chairs in our classroom at church, ready for our weekly doctrinal discussion, which I was leading that day.

No one said anything when the announcement was made, except the woman with long, unkempt gray hair who always wore ancient yoga pants and shabby sneakers. “Why aren’t we hanging door tags here in the city? This is where people need to get the message.”

I found myself thrusting my finger toward her and almost yelling, “Leave these people alone! People come from all over the country to San Francisco to feel safe being who they are. We should respect them and leave them alone!” I took a few ragged breaths. With tears clouding my eyes and my voice breaking, I said, in not quite a whisper to no one in particular but to every Mormon I’ve ever known, “I don’t know why I am even in this church anymore.”

I consoled myself in those last weeks before the election with the certainty that Prop 8 would be defeated. But, of course, that’s not what happened. That November, as I was still healing from the loss of the only person I’d had sex with, Prop 8 succeeded on California’s ballot, destroying hopes of dignity and marriage for people who simply cherished love and each other. I was shocked, bitter, and full of shame. I had to walk away. Besides, I had had sex outside of marriage. I wasn’t a proper Mormon woman anymore, was I?

For the next two months, I didn’t go to church. I tried to live as if my religion were a memory, like beloved grandparents who had died, or a book I had read and loved a long time ago.

My plan didn’t work. In those weeks away from church, I was unmoored. Listlessly pacing around my apartment on a Sunday morning in December, I couldn’t think of anything to do. I didn’t want to go shopping. I didn’t want to go for a walk or to the museum. There was no way I was going to do any work. Sundays had always been sacred days for church, for spending time with family and church friends, for reading and contemplating and resting.

I was forced to admit that I was bereft and miserable being away from church. I missed my religious community. I missed that spiritual nourishment. I missed God. But most importantly, I missed my identity

as a person of faith. By skipping church, I wasn't just ignoring a weekly activity, I was turning my back on a way of life. I wanted it back.

But would being at church every Sunday constitute an endorsement of a policy that broke my heart? I asked myself, "If I found out my Dad were a hit man, would I still love him? Would he still be my Dad?" My answers, ultimately, were yes and yes.

If I could accept those theoretical opposites, could I tolerate the real opposites before me? I had to try. So, in January 2009, I went back to church, tentative and wary, and was welcomed as if I had never been away.



The physicist Frank Wilczek describes the complementarity principle simply: "You can recognize a deep truth by the feature that its opposite is also a deep truth."¹

In the cauldron of the fall of 2008, I found the capacity to hold both my absolute love for the Church and its doctrines *and* my deep frustration and disapproval of its position on gay marriage. I looked right into the reality in front of me. I saw it all. I grew up.

My new power to embrace contradictions flowed into the rest of my life too, as welcome as cream over a bowl of strawberries. I could accept that the two things I desired most in life—a vibrant sexual relationship with a wonderful man and a transcendent relationship with God as a faithful Mormon—were fundamentally incompatible. Without being married I would never have both. I accepted that insoluble dilemma.

I reexamined the conflicts in my own character too. I was expert at corrosive self-talk. "You may have been lovely to that one person," I'd say to myself, "but you know you're an impatient, condescending bitch! Your flaws cancel out your strengths. Don't fool yourself."

1. Frank Wilczek, *A Beautiful Question: Finding Nature's Deep Design* (New York: Penguin, 2015), 52.

But the voice in my head started to accept that my worthwhile acts deserved to stand on their own. I started to believe that my kindness and impatience could coexist.

This was tender territory. Starting to see myself as a good person was disorienting after decades of feeling like a “bad” Mormon. Little by little, though, I found the capacity to accept myself as a “good enough” Mormon woman, even with my iconoclastic independence and unorthodox desires. I am as full of contradictions as a person can be, but I am completely devoted to God. And God knows it. Of that I am certain.

When I accepted my complete, complex heart and soul, I became converted to the subtle and profound truth. There is more than one way to be sacred, more than one way to be good, more than one way to love and be loved by God. We each have an offering, and we are all worthy to make it.

I gained a capacity to be all of who I am—a complicated, thorny woman, with a bag of bees and lit candles and delicate eggs and crystalline jewels and razor-sharp knives and mud-caked horse hooves inside me. For decades they clattered around in dizzying disorder. Now they have found an orbit, humming along in an energizing harmony that sustains me. They are all meant to be there.

I’ll never be a “normal” Mormon woman, but it doesn’t matter anymore. I created my own place to stand in my church and in the world.

Happily, in 2015, the Supreme Court invalidated the bans on gay marriage. When I heard the news, I started sobbing, filled with joy that everyone can say “yes” to whomever they love. I also felt relief. For years, every time I met a new gay person, I had said, “I’m Mormon and I’m sorry.”

Even if the damage the Church did to gay families in 2008 was reversed, in 2015 the Church set a new policy that created barriers against baptism for children of homosexual parents. They reversed that

policy in April 2019. When I read the news, I wiped away tears. Any and every reason to hope is precious.

The events in 2008 brought enormous insight and expansion into my life, and yet I didn't find the courage to say yes again, to seek my own sublime and ravishing love. My heart couldn't untangle the joy of love and the pain of loss. "No" still feels safer than risking my heart, body, and soul.

But when I have had the courage to surrender, love has hurled flashes of incandescent beauty into my life. An intense and brief flame is better than no heat and light at all.

My sacred and my carnal experiences with love taught me the same lessons—to surrender certainty, to embrace the totality of my lived experience, and to welcome the contradictions that flow exquisitely through my body and out into the world.

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