

HANDCART APOSTASY

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My grandma was a collector. Of dolls, spoons, PEZ dispensers. When she died six years ago, all ten of her children were able to redistribute her hundreds of lovingly collected Nativity sets representing dozens of countries from around the world. Through her life, my grandma moved to different houses in different countries while my grandpa worked in the US Foreign Service, and the two of them served a mission together. Sometimes, her collections came with her. Other times, they waited for her back in Utah, where she would eventually return to carefully display each item with individual knowledge and love.

According to family lore (or, at least, what my mother has always told me), my grandma's love of *things* came from a lost elephant collection, thrown away when she left her childhood home for college—a loss she mourned for the rest of her life. That's why, my mum has said, we all got dolls and spoons and bells and PEZ dispensers and Nativity sets when my grandma died; she collected things as an act of mourning and defiance. In a strange inherited heartbreak, I find myself liable to tear up over lost gloves, let alone a misplaced loved item.

Collections have also made me particularly sympathetic to the stories of my people—pioneers—who packed the things they loved most (children, yes, but also pianos and dishes and cabinets and handmade quilts) into handcarts and wagons and fled their homes, looking for Zion and Jesus and safety and community. Maybe it's having spent four years away from my home country or maybe it's a bit of my grandma haunting me, but I think there is something sacred about the things people choose to carry with them when coming or going from a holy place.

Maybe this feels so profound to me because I have spent most of my adult life coming and going from the LDS Church.

I came back to church two and a bit years ago after five years in almost-exile. I like to describe my relationship with my faith as one of wandering (yes, like the lyrics to “Come Thou Fount”).¹ I first found myself outside as a sixteen-year-old, uncertain how my feminism and academic ambitions could fit into Young Women lessons that taught that womanhood could only mean one thing. I came back when I moved to New York City at eighteen because I was homesick for my mother’s singing. But I fled again when, a month into university, questions about my own queerness got entangled with the 2015 policy about baptizing LGBTQ couples’ children.² I eventually found my way back for two years until weekly church started to hurt too much. Telling myself that Jesus didn’t need me weeping in the back of a chapel every week, I left for half a decade.

And now I’ve come back again, this time as my PhD research focusing on Mormon YA fantasy reminded me how much I love the theology of this gospel. As I studied characters becoming gods and wrote about eternal families, I started yearning for my community and wandered (quietly) into the back pews to see if I could find a place to rest for a while.

And while there is, perhaps, a triumphant reconversion story somewhere in my two years back at church, that version of my story doesn’t feel accurate to me. I don’t know if my wandering is over, and

1. “Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing,” *Hymns—For Home and Church*, no. 1001, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/music/text/other/come-thou-fount-of-every-blessing?lang=eng>.

2. Laurel Wamsley, “In Major Shift, LDS Church Rolls Back Controversial Policies Toward LGBT Members,” *NPR*, Apr. 4, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/04/04/709988377/in-major-shift-mormon-church-rolls-back-controversial-policies-toward-lgbt-membe>.

I'm still unsure of whether I can say "this is the place" on my own faith journey.

Instead, my story about coming back to my faith can be better explained with the metaphor of my grandmother's collections. Throughout her life, she gathered different items and stories, which quickly became treasures for us when she died six years ago. By holding onto things she found valuable—from Nativity sets to spoons to bells—she was able to create a rich treasure trove of a life that followed her around the world.

My favorite thing about my grandma's collections was how well she knew every item. As she moved from country to country with my grandpa and ten kids—living in Austria, Ireland, Morocco, Venezuela, Panama, the Philippines, Spain, and Greece—she found treasures and received gifts. She could tell us which child or friend gave her each Nativity set and exactly which part of a market silver spoons came from. Each PEZ dispenser had a place of honor on her shelves. She was even able to describe the origins of the incredibly creepy trio of dolls (another gift from friends) that my closest cousins and I inherited after she had moved back to Salt Lake City in retirement.

Even when it became clear that she would need to redistribute her precious items before going to a retirement home, my grandma was protective of her collections. She wanted their stories to be remembered. She knew that she had created a physical history with her life. She knew how to cherish that story and ensure that it was preserved.

And maybe it's sentimentality, but moving out of a house also makes me think of all the biblical and pioneer stories that we celebrate of people who pack boxes into handcarts and wave goodbye as they go in search of a promised land.

But also, I often think of one woman whose story isn't celebrated.

In coming back to church, I've been reminded of Lot's wife (the woman who looked over her shoulder at the "sinful" city she had called home) several times, when well-meaning ward members or friends have

suggested that the righteous should not feel nostalgia for sin or have claimed there is nothing worth missing outside of the LDS Church. I've also been reminded of the rich young man who was told by Christ to abandon all the things he loved in the world to "come and follow me" (Matthew 19:21).

What we know about Lot's wife is told in Genesis 19:26, as she and her husband flee the destruction of Sodom. There are many things I dislike about her story (including that, as often as I think about her, we do not know her name), but here's what the Bible says about her anyway: as she and Lot were leaving Sodom, she looked back at her home and, apparently because of this, she was turned into a pillar of salt. This is all we have of her—one single verse of grief, punishment, and death. "[She] looked back from behind [Lot], and she became a pillar of salt" (Genesis 19:26).

I understand why we tell these stories, but the thing is, the rich young man had "great possessions" (Matthew 19:22)—like my grandmother's collections—and Lot's wife had a whole entire *lifetime* in Sodom. They both—according to the stories—had things to love and miss.

Or, in my own life, five years is a long time to build a life outside of the church.

And there are things that one collects in that time. Habits (Sunday brunch at the local coffee shop, anyone?) and communities (London Pride next June?) that don't easily fit into our conception of a faithful LDS life. Relationships, too.

In 2020, I met a British boy with red hair and a perfect accent who is also a writer. We celebrated our four-year anniversary last October, sitting in the darling Edwardian flat in London that we've rented together for three years. We argue over dishes and curtains and who has to double-check that the oven is actually switched off (it's always him). He waits patiently to go to bed as I read scriptures in the evening and meets me after church on Sundays to walk in Hyde Park, even if he reminds me that atheists, like him, get two lie-ins each weekend. We're

not married and don't want to be. Most importantly, he loves me and I love him and we've built a life together. And I couldn't imagine comparing him to a sinful city or a rich man's overinflated wealth.

But I don't tell my friends at church about him. How can I? I'm in a YSA ward and, to quote my grandma (who really was very understanding and devastatingly funny), we "live in sin."

I've had (wonderful, well-meaning) people in my life tell me that there are easy solutions. We could get married. Or we could break up. What is a boyfriend compared to all the possibilities of the gospel? A temple recommend? Not having to avoid conversations with my bishop because *what if he asks something that I would have to lie about?* I don't have simple answers except that one solution seems rushed and the other seems tragic.

Even more importantly, after what have felt like genuine, sincere, and difficult prayers, I cannot bring myself to believe that my relationship is sinful or shameful or something I should apologize for. That's not the answer I've gotten or a doctrine I can believe in. I don't even think my behavior is wrong.

I just think it's something unconventional and wonderful that I've collected during my time wandering outside of my faith.

When we tell (re)conversion stories with Lot's wife as a warning, what we are really saying is that our church is a church of extremes. Either with us or against us. Good or bad. Righteous or sinful, worthy of destruction. No looking back.

We need better stories to talk about coming back to the Church, especially as more and more people will find themselves prone to wander in and out. If Lot's wife is the paragon of consequences for what happens when we fail to turn away from sin, we create an all-or-nothing story where many people (like me) feel like staying away is the only option.

Jana Riess's work has shown that many millennial and Gen Z Mormons will leave or take breaks from the Church. According to her

research, modern politics and questions about Church leadership have millennials changing their relationships with the Church at increasingly high rates, more in line with other religious communities.³ To be specific with numbers, retention rates have dropped from 72 percent among boomers to 46 percent among millennials. In my own generation, Gen Z Mormons are more likely than the national average to feel harmed by their faith or to feel like they cannot bring their “whole selves” to church.⁴ And Riess explains that there are reasons to question these numbers, but also reasons to take them seriously. Anecdotally, many of my friends from high school and my home ward haven’t managed to have the straightforward relationships with the LDS Church that we yearned for as children.

That’s all to say that I am not the only person who has been wandering. Which also makes me think that I might not be the only one asking what it means to return. To be entirely clear: I don’t want to make this seem like leaving or returning to faith is inconsequential. I’ve mourned and celebrated in the past years as I’ve found myself at church again. On several Sundays, I have found myself crying in the back of a chapel. None of this is uncomplicated.

And yet, it feels important to understand that while leaving doesn’t have to be permanent, it also doesn’t have to be expunged from our memory if we do decide to try again. As so many of us explore new and different ways to be Mormon, I want to celebrate those who find happiness clearly in or out of the Church. But I also wonder about those of us who wander through the grey area.

What happens to a Saint who has left and then comes home? What will we bring with us when we do?

3. Jana Riess, “Introduction: The Changing Face of Mormonism in America,” in *The Next Mormons: How Millennials Are Changing the LDS Church*, edited by Jana Riess (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

4. Jana Riess, “How Religious Are Gen Z Mormons in the US? The Results Are Mixed,” *Religion News Service*, Dec. 27, 2021, <https://religionnews.com/2021/12/27/how-religious-are-gen-z-mormons-in-the-us-the-results-are-mixed/>.

I hope that, unlike my grandma, we will not find our precious collections disposed of and disregarded just because we've been away. Nor will we be told that there isn't a place for us in the Church with the beautiful things we've found while we've been gone.

I love my grandma's collections because she held onto things that, at some points in her life, it would have been more sensible to abandon. International moves, big life changes, and a house crowded with ten children don't make being a collector easy. But every item, no matter how ostensibly worthless, by virtue of being hers and being kept, has become indispensably valuable to our whole family now (yes, even the very creepy trio of dolls). If my grandma's collections have taught me anything, it's that sometimes it's worth saving things, even if they don't fit easily into a moving truck, a tiny closet, or, in my case, the modern LDS mold of what a "believer" should be.

Maybe Lot's wife had good reason to look back at what she was losing. As she and Lot left their home to go find a better land, they were also leaving a whole life behind. She might have been mourning her home, her friends, the experiences she'd had in Sodom. Did she leave behind a piano that she'd played for her whole life? A collection of beloved elephants she knew she would never see again? Did she have time to say goodbye? To ask her loved ones to come with her? Or did she grab an emergency bag and run?

What if she was looking back to make sure her handcart wheels were rolling along as they ought?

In Genesis 19, we don't get an answer for why looking back at Sodom was such a problem. In scripture, we aren't even told that looking back was punishable, a sin. In later scriptures, Christ calls his disciples "the salt of the earth," referencing the practice of salting meat offerings (Matthew 5:13; Leviticus 2:13). Instead of a punishment, could a "pillar of salt" be a testament to the "savor" of a woman who was both a pioneer and a woman of Sodom?

While we don't know much about Lot's wife, one thing we do know is that when God asked her to leave her home, she did. She packed her

bags and went trekking into the desert with her husband. This is not the story of a woman without faith or a woman who couldn't give up her home and comfort for God. It's a story about a woman who was able to see the value in what she was giving up, able to ask questions, able to mourn.

In looking back on the place she was leaving, maybe Lot's wife's "saltiness" was a practice of faith, a testament to her sacrifice. Lot's wife might be an example of remembering what is lost when we set off to the place God has prepared for us, but also what we can bring with us. A promise that none of us come to Zion empty-handed—we bring lives and stories, adventures, and wanderings along with us.

Maybe, instead of being a cautionary tale, the story of Lot's wife shows that we can both look back and carry on, all at once. Maybe what she practiced was a type of "handcart apostasy," where a complicated faith, imperfect as it might be, can still bring us closer to Zion. Where we are allowed to carry both the good and the bad with us as we wander through this world.

I think my grandmother—a mission president's wife, temple worker, lifelong Mormon, and devout follower of Christ—would have looked back at Sodom. She would have remembered the people she loved there and the places she'd found familiar. I know I would have; I know I do.

To borrow Carol Lynn Pearson's phrasing, "I have packed the handcart again / packed it with the precious things" that I have to carry with me as I walk toward the promised land.⁵ Mementos of my time outside of Mormonism, enjoying life as the rich young man and basking in the desert sun of Sodom. This time, I'm bringing the man I love with me (baffled as he is by the Mormon girlfriend he's somehow managed to collect). I'm also bringing excellent taste in coffee, two tattoos, and a

5. Carol Lynn Pearson, "Pioneers," available at <https://carollynnpearson.com/pioneers>.

whiskey collection that Brigham Young would envy.⁶ And I'm sitting in the pews each week, trying to find out if there's a place prepared for me in this church I love. Maybe it's a childish dream, but I yearn for a promised land where I can pack up everything I am and everything I have and find myself welcomed home.

But the truth of it is, if I had to leave everything behind to come back, I would stay away. If I'm going to rest from my wandering back home in my childhood religious community, I want to do it while celebrating the complexity and imperfection of the faith I've earned. I'm not ready to promise not to glance over my shoulder. Camels are too big for needles in this lifetime. I like my salt filled with savor, not sin. And I prefer to think of my faith journey as a handcart, pulling precious things, or wagons bringing pianos to the future choirs of Zion.

Even more, I like to think of my faith like my grandma's Nativities, especially the one that showed an elephant celebrating the birth of Christ. She never told us this, but I've always thought that one was extra special, a reminder of a collection she lost and never forgot but was able to rebuild over time.

She never got to meet my boyfriend—I think she would have loved him too.

6. Fred Minnick, "Young Was Once a Distiller," Feb. 1, 2013, <https://whiskymag.com/articles/young-was-once-a-distiller/>.

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