

FRUITS OF THE MIMOSA TREE: REFLECTIONS ON THE POX

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I don't remember who told me about the POX.¹ I have an idea, but it would be a guess. I do remember looking at a lamp while she did it. There was a water stain on the table. I traced the white edges, foamy and hard at the same time.

"People don't believe the Church would do this," she said. Her voice had a hint of laughter, but it was the kind of laugh you laugh when you are horrified.

I don't remember what I said back, if I said anything, but I remember what I felt: I didn't know why anyone wouldn't believe they'd do it. Of course they would do it. It was the least surprising thing the Church had ever done.

I wasn't even mad about it.

I'm probably not going to say the things you expect me to say about the POX.

I'm gay. When I chose to marry my wife, the rules of the POX were in full effect, though it had been lifted by the time we actually married, amid the lockdown of 2020. I knew choosing to marry her meant mandatory excommunication. I knew it meant my children would not be allowed at church. My son would not receive the priesthood. Unless he renounced me when he turned eighteen, he would not be called on a mission. And I knew him well enough to know he would never renounce me.

1. "POX" is a common shorthand for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints' 2015 "policy of exclusion."

My children stood with me under the bough of our wedding tree. The florist draped it with flowers of blue and purple and red and orange. It was autumn and all the leaves were falling. The wind blew and a camera broadcast it. People in countries around the world watched as my wife fed me a piece of bread, as we drank wine from the same cup, as we fastened our hands together with twine.

I was secretly relieved lockdown meant no one could come to the wedding. There were no relatives there to quietly judge or cry because we were breaking the eternal line of the family. Destroying the bonds that God, himself, had bestowed on me and my ex-husband in the temple. My ex-husband was there, though, smiling. He handed us the cup of wine to drink from. Our family may be queer, but we have always loved each other deeply.

The POX, like lockdown, made my life easier.

Because for once, *once*, the Church wasn't lying about the violence it was doing to me.



When my children were babies, when I was still married to my husband, long before the POX, a friend cooked us dinner. Japanese potato cakes, he said they were, fried with onions.

"These are so good," I said.

I can taste them, even now. The way the outside was crispy, the inside melted with cheese. They popped as you ate them, and it was a sensation you felt with your entire body.

"I always wanted to be a cook," he said. "My mom never liked that."

His roommate, a librarian, said, "The first present I can remember wanting for Christmas was an Easy Bake Oven."

"Ugh," said my friend. "The things I could have done with an Easy Bake Oven! Can you even imagine!" He stood at the stove, dropping the potato cakes into the pan, flipping them, not looking at us. "I can't even imagine asking for one."

The kitchen was quiet as we all chewed. The sound of the popping oil on the stove the only punctuation.

“I told my mom,” said my friend, “I told her I had to leave the Church. Because I was gay, and I couldn’t marry a woman. I could try to be celibate, but I wanted to kill myself. There was nothing to hope for, nothing in the future that made any sense. It felt like leaving was the only way to stay alive.”

“What did she say back?” I asked.

He laughed. It was more of a breath—bitter, resigned, sad. “She said it would have been better if I’d killed myself.”

My children ran into the room. Ran out of the room.

The potato cakes sizzled.



You probably expected me to say the POX was bad. And it was. It made no sense. It was inconsistent with any semblance of Mormon theology as I knew it.

I know of someone whose father wrestled them to the ground, physically trying to beat them into submission. Because if they were excommunicated it would destroy the eternal family.

I have more than one friend who died by suicide. Because it was impossible to be in the Church and it was impossible to leave.

The POX did that.

But years, decades, before the POX, I told the story of the potato cakes to someone at church. She was a mother, too, and one of her children was gay, though I’m not sure she knew it at the time.

“I can’t imagine,” I said. “I can’t imagine telling my child it would have been better if he’d killed himself. Surely—*surely*—it is better to be alive and gay than dead and not in the Church.”

She looked sad as she shook her head. “Kerry,” she said. “It *would* have been better.”



When California was trying to pass Proposition 8, to ban same-sex marriage, I went to a family wedding in the temple. We were all sitting in the sealing room, dressed in our temple robes, waiting for the bride and groom to appear.

“I’m marching on Saturday,” said my Aunt. “It has to pass.”

I looked at the mirrors on either side of the room, reflecting back and forth, into the eternities, the altar at the center. Most of my adult relatives were there, though she was the only one who was talking.

“It’s an insult to the sanctity of marriage,” she said. “To even *think* about allowing *sex addicts* to pretend like what they experience is *love*.”

I stared at her.

She had a gay son. She knew it. We all knew it.

The reflections of the mirrors seemed to grow larger, deeper. The altar at the center of the room felt heavy.

None of us said anything.



When I was a little girl, there were Mimosa trees outside our chapel. The blossoms were like little explosions of pink, exotic, even the sight of them tasting of heat. When they bloomed, it was always so hot, you could see the waves of air coming up from the sidewalk as if they were reaching toward the flowers.

Once, I sat underneath the Mimosa tree, waiting for my parents to come out to the car after church.

Two women were on the sidewalk, whispering. The waves of heat danced around their ankles, the smell of sweat mingling with the scent of Mimosa blossoms.

“Did you hear about the Rasmussen baby?” The taller woman looked around her, as if she didn’t want anyone to hear. If she saw me, she didn’t think I was worth noticing. I must have been six or seven.

The other woman put her hand on her chest. “It’s awful, just awful. What are they going to do?”

“What *can* you do? I guess they just . . . have to pick. What do you do if your own baby is . . .” she lowered her voice “*a hermaphrodite?*”

“How do they pick? Does the baby just have both parts?” The other woman couldn’t help but raise her voice a little. “Do they just . . . cut one of them off? How do you decide girl or boy when there is no way to know if it is a girl or boy?”

I wasn’t sure what they were talking about, or how any of it was possible. All I knew was that from what they said, it must be the most horrifying thing that could possibly happen to a baby in the entire world.



We got our first visit from the missionaries in ten years this week. My mother-in-law answered the door because my wife was in the hospital and I was there with her.

“Someone at this address used to be in our church!” they said.

“I don’t think anyone here goes to church, but I’ll give them your card,” said my mother-in-law.

I didn’t know whether to laugh or be annoyed when she told us about it later.

For ten years, they never came to our house. They never asked if they could bring my children to church. They never tried to make my children feel like they were missing something because of the “sins” of their parents.

No one ever told them their mother’s love was counterfeit.

My children had two mothers and a father who loved them.

No one told them it was supposed to be wrong and bad.

No one told them we had destroyed God’s plan for us.

No relative ever tried to sneak them to church or get them to go on a mission. No relative ever asked if my son was going to be ordained. They didn’t even try to get them to go to church when we visited for Christmas.

My children never sat under a Mimosa tree and heard women whisper about how horrible it was to be born different.

The POX did that.

I think you expect me to say the POX was bad. And it was.

But it was honest.

It saved my children from knowing the hate I knew.

It saved my children from the rending, wrenching horror of losing the only people they'd ever known because of something they could not control.

I'm glad it's gone because it never should have been.

But now there is no one left to tell the little girls under Mimosa trees that "all are welcome" is—and always was—a lie.

And at least the POX did that.

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