

THE QUEST FOR MUTUAL EMPATHY IN THE GOSPEL

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Relational-cultural theory suggests that the primary source of suffering for most people is the experience of isolation and that healing occurs in growth-fostering connection.

—Judith V. Jordan

“For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ.”

—1 Corinthians 12:12

I have a question. Are you Mormon?

Coming from a therapy client, this question always has the potential to be full of meaning. What will it mean to this client if I disclose my religious affiliation? What assumptions will she make about me? How will this impact the relationship and her healing? My client is a religious minority; will she think I am trying to convert her?

I believe I offer a somewhat sheepish *Yes, I do belong to that faith*, hoping that somehow, I have expressed that my relationship with the Church will not prevent me from understanding and empathizing with her perspective of it. Then, I explore with the client the meaning behind her question. *Would you be willing to share with me the reason you are asking?*

Last time when we discussed your theory about how clients get better, you said that empathy is what you believe heals clients. Isn't that what your church believes about how Christ heals people? This insight catches me off guard. Not because I haven't thought about it; my training as a counseling psychologist at Brigham Young University challenged me

to consistently analyze how theories of psychotherapy either aligned with or contradicted gospel theology. I think I am surprised because my clients usually perceive my interventions to be based upon psychological theory rather than religious convictions.¹ Furthermore, the theory she is referring to has deep feminist roots. But now I am questioning myself. Am I evangelizing the gospel?² Of course, I am not going to try to convince my client that Christ is her Savior or that Joseph Smith saw Him as a teenage boy, but ultimately, I do believe that empathy is what will heal her and all of us. Furthermore, I believe that mutual empathy

1. There is a long-standing tension between psychotherapy and religion. I think this is due to some overlap between the two fields: sometimes psychotherapists have been referred to as secular priests. Furthermore, religion and spirituality have been maligned in psychotherapy since its beginning with Sigmund Freud considering belief in God to be an infantile illusion. Given this historical tension, I am used to religious clients approaching me with skepticism and fear that I will challenge their faith. However, it is also true that given the religious saturation of Utah, I am also used to clients who have perceived their treatment from more religiously zealous therapists as dogmatic and preachy. These clients are relieved that I am not suggesting that they will heal solely from more prayer or scripture study.

2. Some therapists may be appalled by the idea of therapy as a form of evangelism and still assume they can do therapy without instilling their own values in their clients. However, I think this form of thinking is antiquated in modernist ideas of objectivity. While I certainly honor and implement psychotherapy's ethic of self-determination, I believe it is impossible to not influence our clients' development. In my opinion, even theories that have the organizing value of client self-determination, like Rogerian-style therapy, still instill their values by what they choose to empathize with and indirectly teach the clients the individualistic notion that their most ideal self exists inside them. All this said, I am using the term "evangelize" here broadly and will concede that the term is loaded. Hopefully the process of therapy looks different from a one-sided lesson from an eighteen-year-old missionary, which only intends to convert the listener to the speaker's way of thinking. Instead, I believe our best hope for therapy is that both the therapist and client will be changed by their encounter with each other.

is what will heal the membership of the Church and help us progress to becoming a more Zion-like community.³

My client asked me this question because we had been discussing how I believe that clients get better through psychotherapy in our previous session. Psychology, especially psychotherapy, is as much a philosophy as it is a science, and this means that psychological opinions about how clients heal vary and sometimes flatly contradict each other. Like most therapists, I integrate many theories, but much of my theoretical ontology is largely found in relational-cultural theory (RCT). The roots of RCT can be found in Jean Baker Miller's work *Toward a New Psychology of Women*.⁴ One of the central claims of this book is that strengths typically associated with women, such as service to others, openness to vulnerability, and desire for affiliation with others, are not valued and sometimes even disparaged as unhealthy due to the patriarchal foundation of modern psychology. The book further claims that theories of psychotherapy erroneously prioritize independence and self-interest rather than interdependence and relationships. According to RCT, the progression toward psychological health is not from dependency to individuation but rather from dependency toward a more mature mutuality. We don't grow out of our need for relationships but rather into more mature relationships where differences can be met with empathy and understanding. Furthermore, it is in such relationships where deep meaning and deep joy meet.

I do think my client is right, that my socialization in the theology of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints makes RCT appeal to me. Culturally, my experience growing up in the Church was filled

3. This type of community is envisioned in Elder Dale G. Renlund's talk from general conference in October 2021. Dale G. Renlund, "The Peace of Christ Abolishes Enmity," Oct. 2021, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2021/10/43renlund?lang=eng>.

4. Jean Baker Miller, *Toward a New Psychology of Women* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976).

with service to and affiliation with others. I recently had a friend who has stopped attending church tell me that she feels as though the people she encountered outside the Church were more selfish. She does not believe that they are inherently selfish, just that they haven't been raised in an institution where service for others is emphasized. While I haven't observed this myself, this insight reinforced for me some of the goodness of my upbringing and its focus on service and the value of affiliation.⁵ As far as vulnerability, while I was socialized in a hegemonic masculinity, I do think that in the Church there were at least some proper venues to express more vulnerable emotions, even if that was largely limited to the fast and testimony meeting pulpit and priesthood blessings.

While I do appreciate how the Church has functioned as a counterculture to my indoctrination to radical American individualism, I also believe that we as a church could grow by applying the principle of mutual empathy found in RCT. As psychologist Judith V. Jordan explains, mutual empathy is experienced relationally when both participants “know, and feel the responsiveness of the other person. Mutual empathy involves mutual impact, mutual care, and mutual responsiveness.”⁶ However, Jordan continues, mutual empathy should not be “misconstrued” as a vehicle for “harmonious and cozy relationships. Founder Jean Baker Miller argued strongly that ‘good conflict’ is necessary for change and growth, and she suggested that we undergo our most profound change and grow most deeply when we encounter difference and work on conflict or differences in connection.”⁷

5. This point was recently reiterated in President Nelson's talk given to the men in April 2021. Russell M. Nelson “What We Are Learning and Will Never Forget,” Apr. 2021, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2021/04/36nelson?lang=eng>.

6. Judith V. Jordan, *Relational-Cultural Therapy*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2018), 7.

7. Jordan, *Relational-Cultural Therapy*, 7.

In my own experience, mutual empathy is mutually discovered as we navigate the dance between expressing our own authenticity and having an empathic understanding of how this expression will impact the receiver. In a dialogue where both people are mindful of this tension and navigate this often difficult path together, both participants are impacted and changed by the other intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually. This encounter creates a closer and stronger relationship where both participants feel better understood themselves and more understanding of the other person. Both individuals experience mutual growth with more relational courage, deeper wisdom and less felt isolation.⁸

Three Cultural Barriers

I think we have several cultural barriers to mutual empathy in the Church, and while there may be more, I would like to discuss three of these below. I also would like to own that this is my experience of the Church and that others may have different experiences.

First, the certainty with which we as members of the Church hold to truth claims can inhibit our ability to consider other viewpoints.⁹ Fast and testimony meetings are filled with claims of belonging to

8. These types of conversations can be emotionally difficult, especially when both people feel passionately or are hurt by the other's actions. An analogy I heard at a psychotherapy conference and use often with the couples I work with is that of two soldiers at war. Both soldiers are injured in the middle of active gunfire but luckily have a jeep. The first soldier turns to the second and hollers, "You need to drive, I am injured." The second soldier excitedly replies, "No way, you must drive. I am injured worse." One of them needs to drive or they will both die. "Drive" in the case of therapy means to do the work of empathy by understanding both intellectually and emotionally why the other is hurting and then trying to make the necessary changes. And if both people are hurting, this often means taking turns driving.

9. Philip Barlow, "The Only True and Living Church?" *Faith Matters*, Apr. 12, 2020, <https://faithmatters.org/the-only-true-and-living-church/>.

God's "one and only true Church." In these testimonies, I often can hear a genuine love and gratitude for how the Church has dramatically improved the lives of some. However, I also understand how such unwavering certainty can isolate those who have doubts about these claims, and those who, perhaps in the spirit of the thirteenth article of faith, find new truth in other worldviews. On a personal level, I had a lot of shame about my doubts when I was growing up in the Church because there appeared to be only one way to be a faithful member. There was an expected trajectory, and the pinnacle was believing the Church's truth claims with certainty. This expectation meant that when I expressed my sincere feelings or thoughts, I was judged to be less developed spiritually and even sometimes judged to be "against God." My heartfelt concerns were either dismissed or, worse, derided. From my perception, the certainty of other members prevented them from empathizing with and understanding me.¹⁰ In contrast, mutual empathy requires that people be willing to learn from, and be changed by, the experience of another person. This type of empathy requires humility about our own position and a willingness to embody another's perspective and pain. Providentially, I have since met many other Latter-day Saints who could empathically hold my concerns and be changed by them, and this has allowed me to find more empathy for those who approach the Church with more certainty.¹¹

10. I would like to note here that I also could have had more empathy for these members. As I have grown older and gained more experience, I understand better the desire to defend a beloved institution, especially one that has profoundly blessed one's life. I also understand the personal pain one can feel when a beloved institution with which they deeply identify seems to be under attack, even if this attack is in actuality just another person expressing their pain.

11. These experiences that destigmatized my genuine doubts and questions have also strengthened my faith, making my faith more broad, deep, and flexible.

Second, in an effort to avoid “the spirit of contention,” we sometimes avoid the real unity that can only come through good conflict. Being a “happy people”¹² is a deep cultural identity for LDS people, and I admire the ability of members of the Church to focus on such fruits of the spirit as goodness and kindness. I also appreciate our desire to avoid contention. In the book of 3 Nephi, the Savior teaches that “he that hath the spirit of contention is not of me, but is of the devil, who is the father of contention, and he stirreth up the hearts of men to contend with anger, one with another.”¹³ In my experience, many LDS members interpret this to mean that all conflict is bad. Even further, some people may believe that any encounter that makes you feel uncomfortable means that the Spirit has left. Sadly, this can prevent people from more meaningful and fulfilling relationships as well as meaningful personal growth because they are never pushed outside their comfort zone. I believe that the deep growth Miller describes as coming through “encountering difference”¹⁴ is similar to the baptismal covenant to “mourn with those that mourn.”¹⁵ For me, this call means more than mourning events that we are comfortable mourning. If we are to take the baptismal covenant seriously and try to emulate the Savior, this means that we work to understand and have empathy for experiences different from our own, even the suffering of our enemies.

Third, we as Church members and leaders can be insufficiently aware of how power differentials impact genuine empathy. I appreciate the ability of members of the Church to obediently submit to divine authority, and I consistently see how following Church leaders allows for members to forfeit selfish desires for the greater good. However,

12. Gordon B. Hinckley, “Each a Better Person,” Oct. 2002, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2002/10/each-a-better-person?lang=eng>.

13. 3 Nephi 11:29.

14. Jordan, *Relational–Cultural Therapy*, 7.

15. Mosiah 18:9.

our respect for and obedience to authority sometimes means that we disregard the voices of our most marginalized members, and this disregard can lead to “unrighteous dominion.”¹⁶ From an RCT perspective, “unacknowledged privilege and the subtle or blatant use of power over others inevitably create[s] division, anger, disempowerment, depression, shame, and disconnection.”¹⁷ Furthermore, when conflict occurs between people in power and those not in power, “open engagement with difference is made problematic, as the dominant group moves expeditiously and often unconsciously to suppress conflict.”¹⁸ Sadly, I witness this type of power and unrighteous dominion sometimes used within the Church. I witness it when members use prophetic counsel or Church statements to silence other members’ sincere questions or different experiences. I witness it with “colorblind” responses when we as white, cisgender, and heterosexual members assert that our most important identity is as children of God so that we don’t have to really consider the different experiences of other children of God—people of color, LGBTQIA+ folx, and other marginalized individuals—or empathize with the trauma of racism, homophobia, and other isms. These kinds of responses erode empathy because they dismiss genuine concerns without doing the loving work to understand them. While focusing solely on our identity as children of God provides some important relatedness and connection, it does not allow for those disempowered within our community to have a voice. This in turn disempowers the whole membership of the Church, just as a body who would say to the feet or hands, “I have no need for thee.”¹⁹

16. Doctrine and Covenants 121:41–42.

17. Jordan, *Relational–Cultural Therapy*, 9.

18. Maureen Walker, “How Therapy Helps When the Culture Hurts.” *Women & Therapy* 31, nos. 2–4 (2008): 90.

19. 1 Corinthians 12:21.

We need all parts of the body of Christ, and all “are necessary.”²⁰ Again, God has said “if ye are not one, ye are not mine”—and such oneness can be neither complete nor authentic if it is purchased by suppressing, coercing, or ignoring part of the community.

My Hope of Mutual Empathy

I have hope for our church that we can work toward more mutual empathy. I hope that we as Church members can recognize that our perception of the truth is not invariably more valid than the perspectives of people who hold different opinions. I hope for a church where members of differing beliefs will engage with each other with mutual empathy and respect. Where we can approach a range of ideas with curiosity and openness. Where we can recognize that our truth is developing and welcome the refinement that comes from engaging others’ notions of truth. Where we can come to understand that the words of prophets and the Church president aren’t necessarily infallible. Where we will approach the prophet’s words charitably but also with personal honesty and integrity. Where we will value his wisdom and humanity but also our own. Where the Church realizes that, like each of us individually, it too has the freedom to repent and become better.²¹

I have hope that we as members of the Church can learn that sometimes empathy for others is painful. I hope for a church where “good conflict” is normalized as part of the growing process of becoming a more Zion-like people. Where members of the Church are frequently taught the difference between “good conflict” and contention. Where

20. 1 Corinthians 12:22.

21. The Lord Himself said as much, according to the Church’s founding prophet. From its very early days, the errors of vanity and unbelief—perhaps even a failure of empathy—had “brought the whole church under condemnation,” which “resteth upon the children of Zion, even all.” *Doctrine and Covenants* 84:54–58.

Sunday school is a place where different opinions can be expressed with less fear. Where we realize that uncomfortable emotions are often not a sign that the spirit has left but a part of the work of empathy and growth. Where we can authentically share, tempered with an anticipatory empathy about how it will impact others in the room, especially those marginalized in our community. Where we further temper our desire to share with “compassionate concern for others” and “bridle the passion to speak . . . contentiously for personal gain or glory.”²²

I have hope for a church where members and leaders with privilege and power will do the empathic work to understand those with less privilege and power. Where, as Blaire Ostler so concretely writes, we become more like Christ by empathically trying to “experience what it is like to be a queer kid who is constantly bullied . . ., the fear of every black mother who kissed her son before he left the house . . ., having our child taken away at the border due to ‘legal complications.’”²³ Where we take seriously the Savior’s charge that we will find Him when we serve those regarded by the community as “the least.”²⁴ Where we as a religious body consistently lead out on this type of empathy and share with others our experiences of doing this type of work.²⁵ Where we members and leaders clearly understand “that ignorance, allied with power, is the most ferocious enemy justice can have”²⁶ and consistently

22. Russell M. Nelson “The Canker of Contention.” Apr. 1989, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1989/04/the-canker-of-contention?lang=eng>.

23. Blaire Ostler, *Queer Mormon Theology: An Introduction* (Newburgh, Ind.: By Common Consent Press, 2021), 45.

24. Matthew 25:40. It has been one of the greatest joys of my profession to serve and gain empathy for those marginalized by society. I experience the love of God more frequently in this type of work.

25. Perhaps a good example of this is President Nelson’s recent work and partnership with the NAACP.

26. James Baldwin, *No Name in the Street* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972).

invite people from marginalized populations to speak to the general membership. Where we open ourselves up to be impacted and changed by the pain but also the resilience and gifts of those marginalized by our community. Where “power” is only ever “maintained by . . . persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned . . . kindness, and pure knowledge.”²⁷

I have hope for these changes because I consistently find people in the Church with this same vision. I am grateful for so many people in the Church who are doing the sometimes painful but always rewarding work of mutual empathy. I am grateful for a stake president who took me under his wing after my mission. Who listened to all my anxious doubts with a compassionate smile and affirmed that I was a part of the body of Christ. That I belonged. I am grateful for several mentors like him who have listened to and empathized with my questions and pain. I have hope because I am currently trying to do this work myself and know it is good work. For me, this experience of mutual empathy is messy and awkward. Perhaps in one respect I resemble Joseph’s rough stone rolling: it is as I bump against other narratives that I am refined. Working on mutual empathy is difficult but meaningful work, and I believe it is God’s work. And if it is God’s work, then I have hope that it cannot fail.

Returning to my client’s question, I think I was also surprised by her insight because sadly I do not always see the mutual empathy described by RCT in the Church. Perhaps this is because the Church is comprised of members like me: sometimes self-deluded and afraid of growing pains but still striving to be an empathically aware Saint. Although not entirely appropriate for a therapy appointment, perhaps I could have answered her: *I can understand how you would think that. Theologically and philosophically, I think that you are correct: the Church does teach that ultimately we are healed by the atonement of Jesus Christ, and that*

27. Doctrine and Covenants 121:41–42.

healing occurs through His perfect empathy for us. However, too often we meet one another with objectification and minimization, especially those from marginalized communities. So, while we as a membership often fail at this endeavor, I frequently do grow when I experience empathy for and from other Saints. Insofar as the gospel is centered on mutual empathy, then yes, I do believe it will heal you and me, and, if shared with others, our community and perhaps eventually the world.

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