

# Developing Integrity in an Uncertain World: An Interview with Dr. Jennifer Finlayson-Fife

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**JFF:** I grew up in Vermont, went to BYU, and got my degree in psychology and women's studies. I was at BYU during a pivotal time, when there was a lot of discussion around women's issues on campus. That period pressured my thinking around the position of women in the Church. I deeply loved the Church, but women's issues were a source of genuine pain and confusion for me, as well. So being exposed to the questions and discussions was formative in my thinking. After that, in 1993, I went to Boston, where I earned master's and doctoral degrees in Counseling Psychology at Boston College. I decided to write my dissertation on Mormon women and sexuality. I was being educated in feminism, but at the same time, I knew my own experiences as a Mormon woman, and recognized the many ways in which the Church had blessed my life and blessed the lives of my female

friends. I could identify with some feminist critiques and how they might apply to Mormonism, but my Mormon experiences also gave me enough distance from contemporary American culture to look critically at how it has dealt with female sexuality. In particular, I looked at whether the feminist critique that patriarchy oppresses and represses women's sexuality was an appropriate one for understanding the experiences of Mormon women. Or was Mormonism actually protective of women's sexuality because the Law of Chastity expected more of men in terms of commitment and loyalty than was expected of men in the larger culture? It was an interesting study, and I enjoyed writing it and learned a lot from it. I put it away for a while and was home with my young kids for several years.

Then about seven years ago, I opened a private counseling practice, and I work primarily with Mormon couples. It's kind of a niche practice—I do a lot of online work with Mormons who have relationship and sexuality issues.

**KH:** Has your practice been mostly working with Mormons since the beginning?

**JFF:** In the beginning, it was about half Mormon and half non-Mormon, but soon there was enough demand on my practice that I stopped advertising. Now referrals are all by word of mouth. The LDS network is a strong one, and Mormons often prefer to see a Mormon because of the shared framework in which therapy can take place. So now my practice is about 90 percent LDS. It's great work and I love it.

**KH:** When we were talking about this interview, you mentioned that your work has led you to think about how Mormons approach the idea of integrity. Say more about how you have been thinking through that concept.

**JFF:** Sure. I think one reason I think about it a lot is that we talk a lot about obedience (for instance, tomorrow the Relief Society lesson is going to be about obedience), and we talk about integrity,

too, sometimes, but we often link it pretty directly with obedience. I'm going to be so bold as to suggest that obedience is not inherently a divine principle. Well, maybe I shouldn't start there . . .

**KH:** Well, it *is* bold!

**JFF:** Choosing to conform to something that you believe or sacrificing what you want immediately for something you believe is more important is a divine principle—I absolutely believe it is. But we use the word “obedience” to talk about those kinds of moral actions—actions based in our integrity—and I don't like the word because it obscures personal responsibility and also elevates obedience in and of itself—which I think is problematic. Many times in my life, I have deferred to a principle or a person I trusted, and it was a smart choice to do it. For example, heeding the wisdom of a doctor, or the wisdom of a parent—there's clearly moral value in being willing to borrow wisdom, and conform to that wisdom. You learn in the process of doing it and you can avoid costly mistakes; you develop your moral thinking in the process. However, what I find problematic is when we value obedience, as though obedience were *in and of itself* a moral good. The problem is that we put responsibility onto someone else for our moral choosing; we frame it as if God values “just doing what you're told” and if your leaders get it wrong, they are responsible for your wrong action. I'm not sure that is true.

**KH:** Yeah, I think of it in terms of obedience to God, or obedience to principle. It might be obedience to God's word, as delivered by prophetic authority, but it is not obedience to another human being that is extolled in scripture.

**JFF:** Right. This is where it gets problematic. We say that the prophet is speaking for God, so if he gets it wrong, I'm not responsible. I think that is absolutely not doctrinally supported, because alongside our notion of obedience, we have the stronger principles of agency and personal revelation, which are the fundamental reasons we believe we came to earth. In my experience,

we encourage the idea of dependence in the Church far beyond what our theology supports. We elevate deference to authority, and want to link it with inherent goodness. I can understand how it happens in the Church. As a parent, I've certainly come to value obedience more than I did before, now that getting my children to do what I want makes my job easier, and I can see how, for those in leadership positions, it makes the job so much easier if people will just go along.

**KH:** It's amazing how much obedience suddenly seems like a very, very important principle once you have a toddler!

**JFF:** Yes! I understand why we value obedience, but I think we can hyper-value it at the expense of our moral development. I don't believe in a god who would let us obey our way into godhood. Instead, God gives us a world in which we may borrow wisdom from others, but we also must learn through the exercise of free will, through mistake-making, through the earnest seeking of truth based in our own thinking, discerning, and seeking. As moral agents, we have to assert imperfect choices amid imperfect realities. That process is fundamental to our personal and spiritual development, but we often don't want the responsibility that comes with that imperfect process. And because of our fear of responsibility, I think we take comfort in the idea of obedience. We can act but have it be on an authority's shoulders—we can escape some of the anxiety of figuring out what is really right. But this pseudo escape from responsibility is to our own detriment, and to the detriment of the group, if compliance is valued over discerning and asserting what you *really* believe is right.

**KH:** Say a little bit more about how you think over-valuing obedience distorts the understanding of integrity—make that connection a little more explicit for me.

**JFF:** Take, for example, the Kate Kelly fiasco. There was this idea that if she would obey, just do what she was asked to do, that she would somehow have integrity; she would then be aligned with

Christ. There was this idea that if she would repent and obey, that's the way she'd have her integrity and spiritual well-being restored. And, of course, what she is saying is, "My integrity does not allow me to do that. My integrity insists that I must stand up for something that the group does not currently accept." And her bishop's response was not to tell her that her idea was wrong, or doctrinally incorrect, but just to demand that she obey as an expression of goodness. And that seems like an organizational immaturity to me—we can't tolerate members with integrity unless we redefine integrity as obedience. It's very human; I can forgive it, but it's not Godlike, in my opinion. As uncomfortable as it is for Kate Kelly to speak up about what she believes is right—and even if she is mistaken or wrong—just the process of speaking up for what she genuinely believes is true, I think is fundamental not just to her development as a person, but for the development of the group. To tolerate and grapple with alternative and varying points of view is part of the process of coming to truth. Even Joseph Smith said, "It is by proving contraries that truth is made manifest." The process of grappling with contradictory ideas is very important to development. But in Church, we sometimes just want to know Elder So-and-So said this about a topic, and we're done talking about it—I think we like that; it's comforting; we love certainty and we want very much to believe that leaders never get things wrong.

I have a beloved cousin who doesn't even put up wallpaper without praying about it first, because she wants the reassurance that it's going to be the *right* wallpaper. And, don't get me wrong, she has great wallpaper! So maybe the Spirit really is confirming her decision! But that characteristic of not daring to make a move without somehow being certain that there's divine approval for the choice—often passed down through a predictable chain of authority... In some ways, that's denying what the gospel tells us is the point of earth life, which is that we're in the lone and dreary world, and there's limited divine intervention, and we have to tolerate the anxiety of discerning and asserting what we believe is right, even with limited information and limited strength.

**KH:** You're using the words "development," "process," "grappling"—it sounds as if you think of integrity not as a thing that one has, but as a developmental task, part of growing up. In thinking that way, of course I think about watching my children grow up, and I have to say, seriously now, that obedience is a really good first principle, and an essential prelude to self-governance. Maybe when we read in the scriptures that "obedience is the first law of heaven," we should be thinking of "first" in terms of the starting place, not the highest in a hierarchy of laws. Lavina Fielding Anderson once wrote about the necessity of becoming "an adult of God," rather than remaining always children.

**JFF:** Of course—when a child is born, she doesn't have a framework for asserting moral positions; children are very much borrowing—even their selfhood is a borrowed selfhood for a long time; they're looking to the grownups around them to come to understand themselves and understand the world they function in. In that sense, obedience is the first principle—you are borrowing wisdom, even borrowing a construction of reality. But if you're going to mature into adulthood, or godhood—as our theology suggests—you have to stop borrowing wisdom and start *aligning* yourself with wisdom, and that is a developmental process that is fundamental to earth life.

I remember being in the MTC, and feeling like obedience, obedience, obedience was being drummed into us. My thinking on this was less developed then, but I remember feeling that there were so many things I didn't know, and yet I felt as if I was being told I had to claim to know them, in order to be okay with God. I remember having a bit of an internal crisis during a testimony meeting in the MTC where I was wondering if God would really ask me to pretend? If I just look the part, does that please God? Or, does God want me to be true to myself, as long as my intentions are sincere in pursuing truth. Is that acceptable to God? The entirety of my mission experience ended up confirming to me that my job as a moral being, as a child of God, was to grapple earnestly with what I believed was right and wrong, and to confront the fact that there are false traditions everywhere, including within our

faith, and to struggle with the Spirit and my own honest effort to know what is right, and live accordingly. So I see that process as fundamental to becoming a developed spiritual person—having an anchored internal sense of self and strong sense of what is good that allows you to be a strong presence in a family, in a marriage, in a ward—just complying does not enable any of that. When we think about people we admire most in history, it’s people who could stand strongly for what they believe is right, despite the social costs of doing so. These are people with a strong sense of rightness, a strong sense of self, and that is an important spiritual and relational reality.

I talk to my clients about this a lot, because in a more dependent stance relative to their relationships or life, they are often underdeveloped relationally and sexually.

**KH:** The virtue of having a “strong sense of self” is not an uncomplicated ideal in a context where “selfish” is the worst thing you can possibly be. Do you think that integrity—this strong sense of self—can enrich relationships rather than threaten them?

**JFF:** You’re absolutely right. And women get this with both barrels—womanhood is linked to “selflessness.” If you’re really a good woman, you’re supposed to just love to give up everything for others, and so there’s a strong sense that you prove your goodness by not having a self, by not having wants and desires, and *certainly* not letting your desires trump anyone else’s wants or desires.

**KH:** The identities available for Mormon women are pretty much child/sister and then mother. There’s not a lot of room for a woman on her own to develop familiarity with her own wants.

**JFF:** Right. And part of the reason we do that is just practical: women who have divested themselves of desire fit more easily into a patriarchal system that requires their deference. Patriarchies value women who don’t have a strong sense of self, economic power, or a well-developed independent life. The ideal of the selfless woman, though, is borne of immaturity and anxiety. *It*

*is a false tradition*, in my opinion. In my experience of working with people, the bargain they make goes something like this: “I will forsake my own development, but then you have to take care of me.” That’s the implicit contract in many LDS marriages, as well as in the Church—I will give up my autonomy and the fulfillment of my desires, and I will trust you, but then you owe me a good life. Husbands are expected to manage their sexuality, keep it directed toward their wives (or at least not anywhere else); you need to be the benevolent patriarch who will put me first and manage my anxiety and self-doubt. I’ll be the *selfless* one, if you will be the strong one. And it’s easy to get enculturated or socialized into this dependent role, what I call glorified under-functioning—it allows you to hand your anxieties off to an (ostensibly) strong other. The problem, of course, is that the strong other is also a flawed human being, who maybe is happy to be needed and glean the privileges of that role, but is filled with anxieties and uncertainties of his own. And he will often disappoint, because people just can’t really keep their own lives together and also be responsible for the happiness of a spouse. And so when that disappointing humanity breaks through—he looks at pornography, or he’s unfaithful, or he prioritizes himself over her—then there are two problems: One is that dependency just seldom works well. It can’t entirely be carried off; resentment and frustration build, and you can’t truly be generous with or desire someone that you believe you need. Second, you may put other people’s needs first, at least ostensibly, because that’s part of the implicit contract, but then one may believe she is owed validation as a good mother or person for her loss of self, expressed through a child’s loyalty of success—because my sense of self is dependent upon your connection to me. It means those relationships are constrained by the neediness inherent “to” the dependent role. So, paradoxically, “selflessness” ends up being exceptionally self-centered. Or at least it can be, if one is trying to manage her or his own needs through other people, rather than taking full responsibility for one’s own life and one’s choices. Perhaps paradoxically, having a strong, healthy self at one’s center allows you to truly give from a position of

strength and generosity, not to give as a function of neediness and vulnerability.

If I know who I am, I know what matters to me, and I feel solid in myself, this allows me to not need constant reassurance from my husband, or from my children. If I am clear about myself, it frees me up to think about what my child needs, what's going to help him or her in their development as a person, and it allows me to give to them because it's the right thing to do, not because I need to glean a sense of self from them, or I need their validation of me through their successes, for example.

**KH:** It seems to me it might free you up to think about what you, as a particular person, have to offer your spouse or children, instead of constantly trying to anticipate what the ideal, non-desiring, selfless Urmutter have to offer her child. I may not have or be whatever that ideal Mormon mother is (in my mind). It's threatening and difficult to realize that I'm not going to be all of that for my child, no matter how hard I try, and to admit that I do have needs and wants that should sometimes take precedence over others' needs and wants, or at least be the subject of a negotiated compromise. But having come to terms with that, having developed a truer sense of what my actual strengths and gifts are makes the relationship richer—it lets me say, “I'm not going to be the mom who sews the prom dress for you, but I can be the mom who doesn't freak out when you ask hard questions,” or whatever it is that I can offer truly.

**JFF:** Yes. So while I think a lot of the rhetoric we hear at church about women and women's roles is sincerely trying to honor women, they often have the paradoxical effect of defining, in a very restrictive way, what a woman is supposed to be. And if your sense of self depends on achieving that pleasing ideal, and you're constantly trying to suppress the things about you that don't fit, it's hard to manage all that anxiety.

**KH:** And actually, I think that men who speak of women that way are actually trying to honor particular women—often their

own mothers, but memory idealizes and may flatten their real personality—and you’ll know the research better than I, but there’s a lot that suggests that we borrow from the surrounding culture to construct “memories,” and those memories become static, frozen, and we can’t let the actual human beings who inhabit them disturb our narratives of who we are, who we have become.

**JFF:** Consistent with that, if you do have a deep sense of self-acceptance, that comes from having forged a sense of self in the world, through your own development, you can tolerate the idea that “I am not that ideal; I won’t ever be it.” Then you can be happy facilitating the people you care about getting what they need from other sources, whoever provides it well, because you’re not in the business of trying to prove yourself by meeting that ideal; you’re in the business of thinking about how to facilitate your child’s growth and development.

**KH:** One of the ways I’ve confronted this is that my daughter is nothing like me—she’s just not similar to me in many ways at all. When she wasn’t bookish the way I was as a child, or didn’t want to play the violin, I really didn’t know if that was ok. My nerdiness, my practicing skills weren’t going to help her, so I had to go about figuring out who *she* is. It was really freeing in a way; if I had thought that I needed to turn my children into perfect beings who would do the ridiculous list of “Things Perfect Mormon Children Do” that I had carried around in my head, we would have been locked into an ongoing conflict that would be really ugly by now by the time she is a teenager.

**JFF:** Yes, and this is why I think marriage and parenthood are divine institutions, because they rub us right there—they push us right where we need to be pushed to grow up. My oldest child is on the autism spectrum, and when he was born, as he developed, there was very little in that process that validated my competency. I was accustomed to control in other realms—I could work hard and make things happen, but with him, I could work really hard and seemingly nothing was happening. It’s very

humbling and it pushes you to the point where you have to say, “Ok, this—being a parent to this child—is not going to validate me. So what is my role here?” And then I realized that my role is to love and facilitate the development of this person to the best of my ability—which is limited and finite—and to tolerate my own limitations, and love him without resenting that his life doesn’t prove me or my power. I have to accept my responsibility to my child—I gave birth to you, and my responsibility is to be a mentor to the best of my ability. It’s not the frantic ideal we sometimes think of; it’s a wise sense of how to work with the resources one honestly has. When parents can do that, it’s a wonderful gift to give a child—the freedom to be accepted and loved for who they are, and not require them to prop up a parent’s wobbly sense of self.

**KH:** Obedience—either my obedience to an imagined religious ideal or my child’s obedience to me—doesn’t really seem to have a place in that kind of relationship. My oldest child is also on the autism spectrum, and, in a way, autism grants him a truly fierce sort of integrity: while he’s sometimes not able to sense other people’s feelings in ways that would be helpful to relational construction of the self, he is also internally self-sufficient and not dependent on other people’s feelings about him for a sense of what’s right. Confronting that was, for me, an amazing way to grow, because I was not going to be able to impose my will on this child, and his acceptance of my will was clearly not the task that he had, because what kind of God would expect a child who *couldn’t* accept that kind of parental input to comply in the ways that another child might. It opens up a huge and terrifying moral and relational territory to explore.

**JFF:** Obedience can be such a limiting frame. It’s a great frame for, say, not running in the street, for not drinking alcohol as a teen—for those rudimentary, basic kinds of guardposts of life. There’s legitimacy to saying, “here are the boundaries.” There’s value in defining boundaries, but you can’t obey your way into adulthood or into selfhood. You have to be willing to take risks—

that's how adulthood pressures us into tolerating the anxiety inherent in living life.

**KH:** Say a little more about what you mean when you talk about “tolerating anxiety”—it has come up a few times.

**JFF:** Okay. For example, I have a client who has been 99.99 percent obedient to everything in the “For the Strength of Youth” manual. He's now in his late twenties, and he would love to be in an adult relationship, but his sexual development is so inhibited by scrupulous compliance to the rules that he's childlike, and terrified of assuming the responsibilities of grown-up sexuality. He struggles to date, because he's afraid of having sexual feelings and responses that are incongruent with Church ideals. He wants shelter from making any mistakes and from responsibility. He's hoping perfect compliance can give him this. This is an extreme example, of course.

**KH:** It's sort of enacting the Primary song, “Keep the commandments; in this there is safety and peace.”

**JFF:** Yes, exactly. And he did get safety from mistakes, I suppose, but not peace. How godly is it to not be able to be in a grown-up relationship? To be so terrified of your own body and your own sexuality that you can't risk being close to someone? He interprets the Church's teachings in the narrowest, most literal sense and is terrified to take responsibility for the possibility that he might need to interpret goodness differently as the conditions of real life change in adulthood. So while that's an extreme example of compliance limiting growth, it speaks to the problem. He wants there to be someone telling him what to do so that he never has to make a mistake or be responsible for his choices. Tolerating the anxiety of not having a rule to comply with at every juncture in life is necessary for growth. Whenever you learn anything new, you are anxious—the first day of school, the first time you show up for a piano lesson. You're trying to do something you've never done before. You don't have a pattern. For some people,

that's crippling, for others, they barely notice, but being willing to tolerate the discomfort of functioning in territory you haven't yet mastered is a necessary ingredient in human development.

**KH:** So what do we call that kind of risk-taking tolerance and learning in Mormon parlance?

**JFF:** Maybe faith—taking a leap of faith, faith to do what you believe is right—get married, go on a mission, have a child . . . All of these require trusting a process that will stretch me, will be difficult, but I believe is right to do. We can call that obedience, but I think it's more constructive to think of it as integrity. I believe something is right, and therefore I am choosing it, and I'm willing to go through the discomfort of the growth process that will ensue. And yet I choose it: I am responsible for that moral choice.

**KH:** So it's taking ownership. It's interesting that you mention missions as an example, because the expectation there is so gendered: for a young man, going on a mission is obedience to a cultural norm, really an absolute dictum, but for a young woman, there's much more space to choose. But that's one of not very many places in the church where girls or women actually have *more* room to choose than men.

Say a little bit more about the gendering of this process; we've been speaking as though it's generally more difficult for Mormon women to develop integrity and a sense of self, but the example of the client you mentioned and of sister missionaries complicates that narrative.

**JFF:** There's definitely a generalized framework in the Church of obedience—obedience being a way to prove your goodness. That's an ideal that both genders share. It's just that what you're asked to comply with is different, and has different consequences. I think women are asked to comply with a narrower sphere, that is primarily focused on nurturing and caregiving—it's a really important part of human experience, but it's only half of human experience. Men are asked to engage in the other half, and, arguably, they miss out

on what women are encouraged to take on as their sphere—the more connected, relational aspects of being.

But men have a little more latitude in how they express themselves. There's more validation for self-development in non-relational realms, for risk-taking, for growth. Men can choose to be doctors, attorneys, teachers—many paths that are expressions of self—and within that, they can grow and evolve. Certainly, there are complications around that; men are shouldered with a lot of responsibility, they're asked not to be dependent, to not show vulnerability—they're supposed to be the strong, benevolent ones. There's just not much room for vulnerability in our notion of what men should be like.

For women, it's the constant pressure to defer to others—to leaders', to men's, to husbands', to children's needs. There's a lot of focus around supporting the priesthood, caring for children—it's noble for a woman to give up a PhD to be a full-time mother—those kinds of examples are what is really valued culturally. It can lead to a kind of stripping of personal development. It makes for a more circumscribed existence. But it limits both men and women. My mother and father, for example, lived this out perfectly: my father got more external validation—he was a stake president, a professor, he did all these things; my mother, on the other hand, was able to create a very rich network of relationships that, for her as an older person now, is still intact, and my father is more on the outside of that. And I think that's been a cultural disservice to him—he lived out what he was expected to be, but now he sees that she has something he doesn't. We'd do better as a church to really value full personhood, development in nurturing and economic roles, for both men and women.

**KH:** I'm guessing that some of what you do is help people think differently about the concepts of obedience and integrity, giving them a way to reconcile new thinking with a fundamentally Mormon world-view, but you also alluded briefly to the idea that as an institution, our commitment to obedience and loyalty to top-down structures leaves us *institutionally* immature. What would it look like for the Church as an institution to reconcile

our traditional understanding of how people ought to respond to authority with the kind of growth you're talking about? Why should we try when what we've always done seems to work well for a lot of people?

**JFF:** Well, I would say that if we want people to stay in the Church, if the Church is going to remain relevant in standing for goodness, it has to continue to be a growing, evolving organism. You can't just throw stakes in the ground and demand that people conform to them—some people will stay, but the institution loses a lot of strength if rigidity forces people up against their integrity.

**KH:** So do you think we might understand some of the current struggle with disaffiliation as part of this dilemma?

**JFF:** I'm not saying, of course, that divergence is necessarily an issue of maturity, but if you are pressuring people against their own sense of right and wrong, and they have a choice of belonging to the faith community or being true to themselves, you will lose the people who are potentially the strongest members and leaders. (Of course, some people will leave for other reasons—because they just don't like being members, or because it's hard, or for family or other reasons—certainly not all of the current exodus can be explained in terms of growth and integrity.) However, an inflexible institution will lose strength.

Theologically and historically, there are lots of support for the idea of a Mormonism that is less authority-driven, instances where there is more of a reflexive relationship between leaders and member. The separation and protection of the leaders from the general membership make it impossible to engage in dialogue with the leadership around sincere issues, sincerely-held beliefs that cause internal conflict, without it looking as though you're challenging their authority. We could think about the situation in terms of parenting—as a good parent, you can't always understand what the experience of your child is, or what you might be doing wrong, unless you open yourself up to hearing it. If institutionally we won't do that, or can't, we are shooting ourselves in the foot.

One time, my daughter was going through a phase where it seemed as if she was whining and complaining about everything, so I said to her, “Can I just role play what you’re doing? And I did an exaggerated version of her whining. She laughed and said, “okay, can I role play you now?” I agreed, and she said, “ok, you be me—say ‘Mom?’” So I said, “Mom?” and she imitated me typing and not responding, and then she imitated me saying “yeah,” but still not actually listening. She thought she was just playing a game with me, but it was revelatory for me—I thought “no wonder she’s whiny!” I could suddenly see in a way I couldn’t have seen without her perspective. What I perceived as whining had been her way of trying to tell me that she needed me to be more responsive. That moment of being offered a chance to repent and do something better can only happen when we stay open to seeing our limitations. I think that good leaders make space for feedback institutionally. Given the way we now treat our General Authorities, I think we’ve made it very, very difficult for them to have moments like that, to hear honest experiences and issues, and have a chance to change things for the better—they are systemically set up to only hear the whining, because there’s not a mechanism to have people communicate what’s wrong more constructively or legitimately.

**KH:** Even if they ask directly for criticism, hardly anyone is going to be willing to tell them what they really think. By making deference to authority the ultimate criterion of loyalty to the institution, we have defined anyone who ever disagrees as disloyal, which makes it almost inevitable that criticism will come wrapped in cynicism and vitriol, rather than being loving and constructive.

**JFF:** Absolutely—and this is that socialized dependency I was talking about, where people want to admire and defer to someone else as a way of avoiding full responsibility for their own choices. We engage in this kind of collusion institutionally—we don’t want to see General Authorities’ humanity or weaknesses, because then we have to be more responsible for ourselves and our moral reasoning. We prop up the mask of their invulnerability to make ourselves feel more secure.

**KH:** In practice, it seems as if it must be healthy and normal for the balance of responsibility and strength to shift between people in relationships—sometimes it makes sense to defer to authority, or to an expert, or just to the person in a family who’s good at something. The kind of integrity you’re describing isn’t merely independence.

**JFF:** I think the paradigm for thinking about this is that the more you progress toward real integrity, the more capacity you have for healthy interdependence. Autonomy and dependence are two sides of the same coin. When you’re immature, it can seem as though those two needs are in conflict—that there’s a choice to be made between being true to yourself and being connected to others. But as you develop a solid sense of self, you become more willing to make sacrifices for the benefit of others—more willing to yield on something that’s important, because it doesn’t compromise your sense of self to do so. It is, in fact, an expression of yourself to do what you believe is right for the benefit of others. If you have a solid sense of who you are and what you believe, then acting with integrity for others’ sake increases your sense of self.

In a healthy relationship, it’s perfectly normal for “niches” to develop—for one person to rely on another’s areas of competence or expertise, for people to specialize in what they’re good at. What isn’t healthy is if one person exploits the other’s strength, or undermines her own development in a way that unnecessarily increases her dependency.

**KH:** So how do we manage that spiritually, in a relationship with God? Clearly, we’re always going to be less developed and less skilled—the relationship is inherently and powerfully unequal.

**JFF:** I don’t think of my relationship with God in those terms, really. I think about God as a loving parent, a loving presence, that can see the best in me and support me in reaching for the best in myself. I see God as helping me find courage to do the right thing. I guess there is an inherent dependency, but it’s not a dependency that keeps me from growing—it actually facilitates growing. I don’t see God as micromanaging my reality or my choices. I don’t

wonder “why did God make this happen? What am I supposed to learn from this?” I think more that life is inherently imperfect, sometimes it’s really hard. I don’t think God makes difficult things happen, they just do happen, because that’s how life is. In the face of difficulty, the question that I think is more productive is “how can I make good things happen in this difficult situation? How do I find the moral courage to create goodness even though I’m disappointed, overwhelmed, or grieving?” I see God as a witness and an anchor in that process of reaching for the best in myself.

**KH:** That word “witness” is striking to me—what does it mean for God to witness our struggles? It seems to me that bearing witness is one of the most difficult things one can do in a relationship; it hurts to watch your child suffer through a choice that maybe you could have spared them, if only they would have been obedient. If you don’t force them to obey, you’re necessarily cast in the role of witness to their suffering—it’s awful!

**JFF:** That’s a really, really hard thing to do, but it’s also a humble and a loving thing to do. In that witnessing, you are holding for your child the belief in their ability, their strength. You are keeping their ability to divine what is right for them as they are reaching for goodness in themselves. Sometimes, holding those things present takes the form of setting limits or holding expectations—I’ll say to my kids sometimes, “I love you too much to not expect that of you. You are capable of this. It would work against you if I didn’t hold the expectation.” It is my job to witness, and to care, but not to interfere in a process that necessarily belongs to my child. I see God as a loving presence, who is aware of me, who cares, who holds expectations for me. I have work to do in my own development—I don’t think of God as having a step-by-step plan for me, or watching me and being pleased or disappointed in my choices from minute to minute, but instead I think of God as holding up for me the ideal of what I can become.

**KH:** I love the passage in D&C 130 about God seeing the world as a sea of glass, where things past, present, and future are made

manifest at the same time to him. Maybe as parents, what we're doing is holding the vision of our child's future self in mind, in imagination, even when his current sense of self might be flying apart—we have this idea of who they might be.

**JFF:** That's a huge gift to give a child—to know they can look into a parent's or a teacher's eyes and feel that even in a crisis there is someone who really sees them and believes in them.

Once when I was going through a bit of a spiritual crisis, I wanted to talk to my mother, but I was worried because she is a strong believer—and I was afraid that maybe witnessing my struggle would undermine her testimony, or undermine her warm regard toward me. So I told her that I didn't want her to worry about me, but wanted her to know what I was struggling with at the time. In my apologizing for my own questions or positions, she stopped me and said, "I want you to know that while I don't struggle with the same questions or challenges as you do, I fully respect what you are trying to work out for yourself and I believe in your ability to do it. You are making a positive difference in the world, and I am in no position to judge you. I have enough to work on in myself. Who am I to spend time worrying about you?" It was a tremendous gift.

It also gave me deeper compassion for her, and for people who believe similarly. Her extending compassion in that way showed me that it is possible for us to love one another in our own journeys toward greater knowledge and living in the Truth.

**KH:** That may be the only way to make difference not threatening—we talk about unity as an important thing for the Saints to achieve, and that makes difference very frightening unless there's a way to get to that sort of unity in our difference. It's so much more complicated than mere like-mindedness, but also richer and ultimately more satisfying.

**JFF:** The times I've seen my mom concerned for a child were times when she thought a child was betraying him- or herself, which is a very different kind of concern than betraying the specific ideology that she believed and wanted them to believe. I think there is a kind of unity that can come from standing for the very best

in people, even though the process of growing toward the best in ourselves will be diverse and will pressure the development of the group in the process.

**KH:** It seems difficult even in a family—trying to imagine it in a larger group like the Church is really daunting. It’s just barely thinkable.

**JFF:** I do think, though, that we could do it. We have this theology that is about agency and atonement and repentance—it’s so much richer than just checking off the boxes and doing everything right and looking down our noses at people who don’t seem obedient.

**KH:** Well, right. We’re glad the atonement is out there for those *other* people, but we really still secretly hope not to need it ourselves.

**JFF:** And yet that seems to have been the whole point of earthly existence—to get messy, to make mistakes, to tolerate the anxiety of imperfection, to suffer. It’s all there in our theology; we’re just immature and still attached to obedience and perfectionism. As Elder Uchtdorf said recently, we slam the door shut; we want the security of fixed ideas, not the uncertainty of growth and challenges to our faith. We all hate that, so we try to build a safe institution, but the brittleness of our certainty makes us fragile.

There’s nothing abnormal about the pressures we feel in our faith community—these are very human realities, and we’re not above them. All groups—families, marriages—struggle with these questions and processes. I deeply love being Mormon, and I believe that Mormonism is part of what gave me a deep sense of identity and self as I grew up. I’ve come to a place where I believe that I am investing in this group, showing that I really care about it when I stand up for what I believe is right, even if I am wrong. My goal is to be able to stand before God with a clean enough conscience to say I really was challenging myself to do what I believed was right—I had integrity. Integrity is being true to what you believe in, even when it’s hard, when it’s uncomfortable, when you give up positions or prestige or

privilege in a relationship. I believe that my integrity is a gift to my marriage, to my family, and to my community. I am most believing when I am seeking truth, because that is a fundamental value of the Restoration. That belief gives me courage to seek belonging and strength within my Mormon faith.