

Being Mormon: An LDS Response

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What does it mean to be a Mormon? Is it what you believe or how you act? "Both," of course, is the easy and immediate answer, but the question deserves closer scrutiny. No longer are we "a peculiar people," clearly segregated from mainstream America by our early Mormon Zionism, our cooperative economy, and our polygamous practices. Individual Mormons fit quite handily into middle-class America, so how does being Mormon distinguish us? Within Mormon communities, faithfulness is often gauged and defined by "activity." Yet among active Mormons, quite a spectrum of attitudes and lifestyles exist. What, then, produces the frequently expressed feeling that as Mormons we are part of a world-wide family whose members belong wherever they might be? Does that comfortable sense of belonging arise from conformity of belief?

As Mormons we all subscribe with more or less fervor to a common set of ideas or principles. I could parade forth a long list of collectively held Mormon beliefs, but if we were to compare honest individual responses to each one of these tenets of our faith we would find not only a variety of interpretations but some significant contrasts. As Gospel Doctrine teacher I once asked class members in my own Pacific Palisades ward what they would expect to find in an earthly kingdom of God. I gave them a list of features from which to choose three that would be paramount. Not only was I surprised at some of the answers, I was amazed at the wide diversity of opinion as to what mattered most. In a more recent lesson on free agency, one life-long member of the Church held the view, quite happily, that "we give up our free agency when

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we become members of the Church. We simply follow the prophet or other church leaders.” This would be a widely provocative statement in almost any Church setting. The appointed balance between obedience and free agency is by no means so clear cut for most of us.

Subjectively, then, being Mormon means different things to different members of the church. We each choose our allegiances. As Jill and Brooke Derr have pointed out, “Mormons have always been able to exercise their personal freedom by rejecting church directives in whole or in part. . . . The Church is a voluntary organization. Members not only choose to belong but determine the extent of their personal involvement by giving or withholding commitment or compliance.”¹ This behavior is not uniquely Mormon, of course. Theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether has noted a similar selectivity among Christians in general: “Individuals in their local communities of faith are always engaged in making their own selection from the patterns of received tradition that fit or make sense in their lives . . . but these differences remain unarticulated, held within the dominant consensus about what the revelatory pattern ‘means.’”² That for the most part “differences remain unarticulated” in Mormon circles as well is true of my current church experience. It was not always so. In the mission field converts were only too anxious to test their beliefs in discussion or argument and I found myself in the role of moderator or wheel-oiler. These days at church I often long to discover what each person believes.

But those individual differences, however submerged, are there. Each of us is unique and has different needs at different times in life. Each individual has his or her own private hierarchy of beliefs and values. To return, then, to the question of what it means to be Mormon, we need to consider the relationship of belief to behavior. Sterling McMurrin has observed that “in religion a person achieves a relation to the world as a totality”;³ and as our beliefs become an essential part of our being, they become the motivators of action as well as the determinants of the quality of those actions. Actions in their turn affect belief — they either reinforce or change it. Beliefs, strong beliefs, demand responses. It is in our weaker beliefs that we waver.

To answer the question of what it means to be Mormon, then, I would have to ask, “Which Mormon do you mean?” *Is* it what one believes or how one *acts*? I can only respond in terms of what “being Mormon” has meant to me through my twenty-eight years as a convert to the church.

Davis Bitton has suggested that “the process of conversion must be worth fuller exploration than it has received . . . what conversion means in terms of family relationships and friends; the painful, perhaps liberating, perhaps ex-

¹ Jill Mulvay Derr and C. Brooklyn Derr, “Outside the Mormon Hierarchy: Alternative Aspects of Institutional Power,” *DIALOGUE* 15 (Winter 1982): 35.

² Rosemark Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), p. 15.

³ Sterling McMurrin, “Religion, Reason and Truth,” paper read at the annual meeting of the Utah Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters, University of Utah, 2 Nov. 1979.

cruciating re-evaluation of life and its meanings.”⁴ For me it was all of those things. Brought up as a Methodist, regularly attending until the age of sixteen (when I was allowed the choice to attend or not), I had become, thereafter, a “weddings, christenings, and funerals” member. My husband, a member of the Church of England, had a similar record.

In 1955 when we joined the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in England, our lives changed dramatically in very obvious ways. I was a somewhat retiring person and it was an effort at first even to walk into such an exuberant, busy congregation. Content with quietly serving my immediate neighbors and family, I was suddenly required to serve strangers in ways that probed my depths instead of merely using the skills that came easily to a housewife. This meant less time for family and older friends, with some resultant stress. It also meant seeing myself as a person as well as a wife and mother of four. I began to realize that *who* I was, the kind of *being* I was, mattered as much to those I loved as the service I was giving. That recognition was born of new challenges which required both that I develop new abilities and that I carve deeper into my consciousness. Teaching, for instance, when I had never taught before, demanded that I confront ideas and spiritual values so that I could know how I felt about them and teach in honesty. My first calling terrified me but I grew to love my group of sixteen-year-old girls. Stimulated by their constant questioning, I became totally involved in their joys and pains.

Since then I have run the gamut of teaching and administrative positions, all of them bringing self-discoveries and accompanying growing-pains, including repercussions in our happy marriage. Previously our personalities had meshed beautifully, my husband’s strengths compensating for my weaknesses and vice versa. After being in the Church a while we found we each were developing new strengths that altered our relationship to each other. Those changes had to be worked through, but our marriage has matured into a much more sharing partnership, full of interest and challenge.

There were cultural adjustments, too. Visiting teaching, for instance, is still hard for me because I had to overcome the feeling (of British origin) that I am invading someone’s privacy. (I believe the low visiting teaching averages in England of 25–30 percent during the 1960s register cultural bias rather than lack of commitment to the program.)

So becoming Mormon required change — active, visible change. The wellspring of all this change was *belief*. In the interplay of belief and behavior, activity often served as an arena for testing belief; and most of the time, involvement validated and expanded my new beliefs so that some of them were transmuted by experience into knowledge. In fact, without action the new faith might have been difficult to maintain. Nevertheless, belief itself had generated the courage, energy, and enthusiasm required to convert faith into practice. Similarly my beliefs today are the strong but silken threads, woven into the fabric of my experience, that help me survive in the Church through other kinds of change and probably even greater challenges.

⁴Davis Bitton, “Mormon Biography,” *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly* 4 (Winter 1980): 12.

Among those beliefs and values which shape my response to a changing world, two are central. In a fluctuating kaleidoscope of beliefs, these two, since I joined the Church, have remained both constant and paramount in the sense that all others are contingent upon them.

The most significant belief concerns the atonement of Jesus Christ. From my childhood I have loved Jesus. In the Methodist Church most of the Sunday School lessons centered on stories of Jesus. But God the Father troubled me. For years I had lived with the sacrilegious thought that not only had God *required* his Son to suffer and die for us, but that he was unfairly taking the credit for Christ's sacrifice. After a long night of discussion with some caring, intelligent missionaries I discovered the foundation, the rock upon which my house of faith would be built. For the first time I understood that God the Father had *allowed* — not sent — his Son, Jesus Christ, to express his love in such a way — a crucial difference. This recognition of God's love inspired within me a new, deep reverence which, when I am still, colors my world.

After listening to talks and comments on the Atonement, whether focused on the mechanics, the parameters, the concept of ransom, or the promises of redemption, I have realized that my own worship is grounded in something simpler and quite basic. Although I find many dimensions of the doctrine intellectually exciting, I am filled with awe simply by the depth of the love of Jesus Christ and of his Father for all of us. The universality of the gift, as well as the intelligence behind it, are only barely comprehensible, but for me it would have been unbearable if the grace had been less — for instance, if it had been extended to just a few, even if the few had included me. The universal and unconditional nature of God's love provides the foundation for my absolute trust in him. It also affects my relationship with the rest of humanity.

First of all, by this exalted standard of love I have measured every scripture and every principle. I judge every sermon, statement, or directive uttered or written by any Church leader by this ideal. And I respond accordingly. I also measure my own response to fellow human beings by this same criterion. Even after many and obvious failures, I am still inspired by love's possibilities as manifest in Christ because of its effect on me and upon the lives of people I know. Second, because the gift of grace was purchased so dearly on behalf of all people, my view of others is necessarily more appreciative and compassionate. Their intrinsic worth has become a fact for me, especially since Church activity has afforded countless opportunities for testing that belief, so that I might know it subjectively.

For instance, when I was Primary president in Manchester, England, I was made aware of the power of this belief. For weeks half a dozen non-member children, ranging in age from six to twelve, had been creating havoc in our meetings. The children were rude, wild, and unkempt — four of them the neglected children of a drunken father and absentee mother. (She wasn't working, she simply ran off periodically and one could hardly blame her!) Because of their disruptive behavior, pressure was put upon me to deny those children access to the chapel. I was miserable. The children were totally unresponsive to affection or discipline; and to make matters worse, they even

haunted our home during the week. But I could not turn them away. The grumbles of some of the members were understandable and even the bishop thought I was totally misguided. Nevertheless he allowed, "It's up to you." Over the weeks a deep belief in the innate value and goodness of those little hellions sustained me and would not allow them to be cast off. Only when their self-destructive behavior and the response it engendered in people reduced me to painful tears on their behalf did those children begin to realize that we really cared for *them*. Then the beginnings of change were seen. Five of them were baptized months later.

Christ's gift of grace clearly implies faith in every one of God's children. From this wellspring of belief a second imperative emerges, one which is linked to a key doctrine in Mormonism. If there is value and great potential in each one of us, then all means are required to realize it. Knowledge and wisdom were what I prayed for most often as I was dealing with those children. I sought a way to love that might help them learn what they were doing to themselves. So in this way my being Mormon inevitably became tied to the law of eternal progression.

Now within the community of Latter-day Saints various aspects of this law affect attitudes and behavior in subtle ways. Our understandings of the doctrine will differ depending upon personal needs and hopes and perceived abilities. For some, "eternal progression" means simply an obstacle course, a testing procedure, leading to the celestial kingdom. For others, it reflects the success ethic of mainstream America, a kind of spiritual or social Darwinism. For still others it represents a hierarchical progression of religious service, leading to a general board (or higher in the case of men) but ultimately leading to godhood. None of these, however, has any appeal for me, especially the last one mentioned, for the quite selfish reason that I cannot bear the thought of the pain involved. (Even Jesus wept.) To me, given a knowledge of divine love and the many challenges faced in answering that love, the doctrine has always meant progression in terms of discovering spiritual truths. I have seen the effects of this progress in others over and over again.

One of the greatest privileges I had in the Church in England, for instance, was working with a young convert from Rochdale, a former millgirl. Without much formal education she became, after joining the Church, one of the most truly educated women I have known because she was so hungry to learn and to understand. As our stake Relief Society president, she was very strong, yet sensitive and compassionate. As her education counselor, I observed that she not only *knew* the scriptures, they were an integral part of her life, a source of her wisdom and strength.

And she loved the saint and sinner in all of us. In the days when sisters were voted in at Relief Society, one ward Relief Society president in our stake had refused to put a sister's name forward for the vote because the woman was living with a man, having done so for many years in common-law marriage. Sister Hoyle believed with all her heart that this new convert should be admitted to the community of sisters unconditionally. But the local ward president could not be persuaded. So Maureen Hoyle put her belief on the line.

She asked me, when I was visiting Salt Lake, to get a ruling on the situation from the General Presidency of Relief Society. When I relayed to Sister Sharp the question posed by Sister Hoyle, namely, "Am I erring on the side of mercy rather than obeying the demands of justice?", Sister Sharp replied simply, "Didn't Jesus?"

The law of eternal progression also involves the development of character and integrity as spiritual truths are discovered, often painfully. Every talk I have given, every lesson I have prepared, has been a confrontation with my own inner convictions. Tensions have surfaced at my probing; paradoxes have emerged that sounded new depths in me as I have tried to resolve them. One such tension was produced by my discovery of the priesthood restriction on blacks when a young black convert had to be told he could not be given the priesthood along with his white friend. He did not survive in the Church nor did his white friend. But another person, a black woman married to a white man, had faced a similar trauma when her young son reached the age of twelve. Her entire branch had risen in protest and almost apostatized en bloc. She did survive, partially because of their support; but also because, through long nights of pain, she arrived at her own unassailable sense of worth, an inner dignity born of a deeper relationship with God, and one that feared not what man might do. I was there in her little branch when, as Relief Society president, she told of her particular Gethsemane. What she needed now, she said, was their faith in her as well as their love. In her strength she pulled that little branch together. I often think of her now that her faith has been vindicated. She had requested our support, but her calm, abiding love had supplied the anchor to faith for many of us.

My unwitting mentor, Lowell Bennion, points out the importance of loving intelligently, with a knowledge of human nature and its needs.⁵ In a similar vein of thought, Arthur Bassett in a recent lecture at Brigham Young University observed that "love is not enough." Instead, he suggests, our question should be "How can I more adequately express love?"⁶

Over the years I have recognized that this question is not easily answered, whether it refers to God or to suffering humanity. Loving intelligently and well can call for an awareness of the unbelievable complexities of human nature. Many of my experiences in the Church have created a real hunger for that kind of wisdom. For me being Mormon has always meant being hungry for wisdom and understanding, or, in other words, for truth in all its dimensions. Hugh B. Brown calls it the eternal quest, and I believe it is. He speaks of "the kind of quest which implies curiosity, a desire to know, a certain teachable humility — all of which are prerequisites to a successful search for truth. They who seek must have courage, must love truth, and must be unafraid of new adventure. They must be willing to depart, if need be, from the beaten path, and to alter and amend their own opinions. They must have vision to

⁵ Lowell L. Bennion, "Thoughts for the Best of Times, the Worst of Times," *DIALOGUE* 15 (Autumn 1982): 103.

⁶ Arthur Bassett, "Love is Not Enough," *Sunstone Review* 3 (April/May 1983): 7.

see, valor to venture and faith to sustain them on the quest.”⁷ It was a new-found faith in the love of God that gave me the courage to “depart from the beaten path” in the first place, and once begun, it seems, the search for truth cannot be halted. Besides, as President Brown also observed, “Eternal existence would be most undesirable if that existence became fixed and static upon arrival in heaven.”⁸ (Or, I might add, upon arrival in the Church.)

As a Sunday School teacher in England I found it difficult to contain the process, to quell the speculation, to temper the ongoing quest among a large group of eighteen-year-old converts, the liveliest class I have ever known. By contrast, my first impression in Zion — that is, until I became acquainted with *DIALOGUE*, *Sunstone*, *Exponent II*, and Mormon History Association members — was that all life-long members, with the exception of some missionaries, were more likely to rest content believing that answers were easily obtainable. I know differently now. In an address at Brigham Young University in 1958 President Brown quoted a prayer from the ancients which might well be echoed by Mormons in this readership, “From the cowardice that shrinks from new truth, from the laziness that is content with half truths, from the arrogance that thinks it has all the truth, oh God of truth deliver us.”⁹ In 1961 he urged the BYU faculty to teach so that “the minds and spirits of the men and women whose lives you touch may continue to be fresh, exciting, dynamic — and hungry.”¹⁰

This, then, was the climate of my early years in the Church and it remains an essential part of what being Mormon means to me. Although this climate of inquiry is the life and breath of my existence in the Church, paradoxically it is responsible for many of my discontents with the Church today.

Religious institutions have always tended to reify even relative truths — political, economic, or nationalistic — but in a universal church our obligation is to resist this tendency if the very nature of our faith is to survive in its pure intent. B. H. Roberts recognized that “some would protest against investigation lest it threaten the integrity of accepted formulas of truth — which too often they confound with the truth itself, regarding the scaffolding and the building as one and the same thing.”¹¹ So this struggle against a conservative institutionalization of our faith is perhaps a healthy and inevitable part of being Mormon. Certainly, desire to impose structure, to exercise some control over what Joseph Smith described as a creedless church, must be an ongoing temptation to those who lead us in this chaotic world. Yet, my chafing can still be part of what I see as a peculiarly vital, Mormon process. Investigation represents the kind of personal challenge that gospel principles themselves would uphold. Tensions help me discover what my values are. Tensions, however, do need to be aired in order to be seen and resolved. In our “unofficial” publications and

⁷ Hugh B. Brown, *Eternal Quest* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft Inc., 1956), p. 17.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

⁹ Author's notes of Hugh B. Brown, address at Brigham Young University, 1958.

¹⁰ Hugh B. Brown in George T. Boyd, *Views on Man and Religion* (Provo, Utah: Friends of George T. Boyd, 1979), p. 86.

¹¹ “B. H. Roberts on the Intellectual and Spiritual Quest,” *Notes and Comments*, *DIALOGUE* 13 (Summer 1980): 127.

forums, such as the B. H. Roberts Society lectures and annual Sunstone Symposium, my own view of what being Mormon means is encouraged to survive.

In the same way that life is a process, for me being Mormon is a process. It is not so much a state of being, a pattern of behavior, a role, or an end in itself, as it is a means — a means by which I might discover God, understand my fellow human beings, and get to know myself. Mormon beliefs and ideas stimulate my mind as well as my spirit; they create attitudes in me and they motivate, even dictate, my behavior. Those responses, in turn, can help me find out — by testing my beliefs in loving service and communion — who I am and who my neighbors are. Belief and activity together should lead to my becoming a better person, a whole person in my own uniqueness.

I believe that the Church as a vehicle can embrace our individual differences easily and happily when sound principles are at the heart of it. Differences in perception of what being Mormon means can make the whole experience vital, exciting, and enriching; our stimulating arguments with much-loved missionaries bore testimony of that. And variety can also guard against stagnation and inflexibility, even in our judgment of “the good.”

When I joined the Church I could not have defined the constantly evolving effects of the new faith, nor could I have foreseen or understood the pain or the exhilaration of the challenging journey ahead. These two central beliefs, of which I have given merely an outline, have been the threads that have bound me to the Church despite the frustrations of what I regard as excess institutional baggage and in spite of the discomforts and trials which have awaited me around many corners. My belief in the love of God and that of his Son has brought an answering response in me, giving me the security to go on seeking, however painfully, my own deepest spiritual understandings. God’s love for *all* reminds me constantly, too, that others, in their uniqueness, must be afforded their own particular way. Today I face questions and problems I never dreamed of twenty-eight years ago. I seek constantly to discuss these still unresolved questions with fellow members, although many seem less than receptive to the kind of in-depth discussion required. Perhaps they are too busy. Perhaps the questions make them uncomfortable. Yet the ready-made community of faith, the opportunities for service, the sense of belonging *could* be an aid to the honest seeker after truth, though in my experience they seem to be becoming less so.

Nevertheless, this is the ideal which being Mormon has generated in me and which is responsible for the choices and actions which at least yearn toward that ideal. Until recently the ideal had been merely felt rather than consciously defined. Today I seek words to express fully the awareness and the ache for my own truth that being Mormon brings, but for the time being John Fiske’s stirring words, as quoted by B. H. Roberts in 1912, may suffice: “In this broad universe of God’s wisdom and love not leashes to restrain us are needed, but wings to sustain our flight. Let bold but reverent thought go on and probe creation’s mysteries, till faith and knowledge ‘make one music as before, but vaster.’”¹²

¹² Ibid. p. 128.