

FAITH, FEAR, AND OTHER F-WORDS

T Boyd

I'm sitting in the bishop's office. My dress is slightly damp, but I can't determine whether the moisture is a result of the snowstorm or sweat beading beneath the cotton. I haven't eaten since yesterday, so I can't vomit, but the churning in my stomach wants to prove otherwise.

The bishop has the questions memorized. He's looking me straight in the eye. "Do you keep the law of chastity?"

"Well." I take a breath. I speak fast, a quirk that's magnified when I'm nervous. "I think of the law of chastity as a way to respect others. And I've definitely had feelings for people that were unreciprocated and maybe made them uncomfortable. And I've seen photos of people I found attractive and objectified them instead of respecting them. And—"

"T, in the temple ceremony, the law of chastity is defined as not having sexual intercourse with anyone to whom you are not legally and lawfully married. Have you done that?"

"No." I shudder. "Absolutely not."

"Thank you." He moves down the list. "Do you understand and obey the Word of Wisdom?"

"I know that it's supposed to be a health code, and I don't take care of myself as well as I should. I don't get nearly enough sleep. I eat meat in the summer, sometimes, and don't really eat that many grains. And definitely too much sugar." I don't want to bother him by making him correct me, so I give him the answer I think he's looking for. "I don't drink coffee or tea or alcohol though."

He nods, then goes on. When he asks about organizations that oppose the Church, I outline my affiliation with any group or person

that has any disagreement with religious teachings—most of the people I know aren't members, so the list is extensive. The last question though, is the one I've been dreading the most. "Do you consider yourself worthy to enter the Lord's house and participate in temple ordinances?"

"Not really, no."

He raises his eyebrows. "Why not?"

It's a reasonable question—I'm here because I want to be. I'm neither mission- nor marriage-bound in the near future, and he knows that I'm approaching my endowment with a great deal of thought and prayer. I've spoken to RMs and currently serving friends, former Young Women presidents, leadership at two temples, sister missionaries, and his wife. This is probably my fourth meeting with him in the past few months regarding the issue.

"Just . . . nothing unclean can enter the presence of God. And I'm human—I'm inherently unclean. I'm afraid that I wouldn't be worthy enough. Maybe it wouldn't count."

"This final question is mostly a reiteration of the rest. You've answered all of these honestly. So let me ask you again. Do you feel like you're worthy?"

I bite my lip, glance at the painting of Christ on the wall, then look away. "Yes."

He smiles widely, signs the paper in front of him. "Congratulations. I feel that you are prepared to enter the House of the Lord. You'll have to make an appointment with a member of the stake presidency for your second interview, but I have confidence that it will go well." He hands me the recommend—unlike my previous one, it's not labeled "Limited-Use." It brings me momentary relief. According to the bishop and the discernment of his priesthood, I'm good enough for God.



Two mornings before I'm scheduled to go to the temple, I wake up with my scriptures open on my lap. I must have fallen asleep studying

them—I'd been up late preparing for an exam. I can't remember the last time I didn't read both a chapter of the Bible and Book of Mormon. It's been years. Maybe this means I'm not worthy if I can't properly honor the word of God. I consider calling to cancel the ceremony. I don't, but spend most of the night before my endowment in the bathroom, sick.

Nobody in my immediate family is active in the Church, so I drive to the temple on a Saturday morning with a handful of close friends from my ward. I take comfort in the blessings of the initiatory, but still worry—what if I'm doing this too early? What if I commit some big sin later in life and can't repent for it? My voice gets caught in the tightness of my throat during one of the covenants—does the fact that I whispered the words instead of said them aloud mean that they don't count? What if my feelings aren't kind enough towards others in the prayer circle? A friend hugs me after we pray—is that against the rules?

At the end, though, I am beaming. Crying tears of joy, I am received into the arms of friends who love and know me as well as anyone in the world. Halfway between two embraces in the celestial room I have one of the few thoughts of the day that is not ribboned with an undercurrent of fear.

This must be what Heaven feels like.



A few weeks later, I'm filling out pages of intake forms in the student counseling center of my university.

How often do you fear that harm will come to others because of your actions?

Every day.

How often do you have excessive concern about morality?

Every day.

How often do you worry excessively about performance in school, work, or other domains?

Every day.

How much time is occupied with these thoughts?

Very frequent/almost constant occurrence.

I don't realize the depth of my problem until it's on paper in front of me. None of this is normal. Faith isn't supposed to feel this way. People caring about you isn't supposed to feel this way. Love is supposed to cast out fear, is it not?

I must be broken.

The psychology graduate student doing her diagnostic training agrees with me that something is very wrong. Clinically severe, she explains, too much to treat at the student clinic that focuses mostly on short-term stress. She gives the phone number of a center specializing in anxiety and obsessive-compulsive spectrum disorders.



Obsessive-compulsive disorder is an illness that claws into what you value and twists it beyond recognition. Everyone has intrusive thoughts, I am told—random words, images, sensations that come into your head at odd times and have nothing to do with what is going on. Most people are able to disregard them. With OCD, though, they are much darker and attached to everything you care about. They cause overwhelming anxiety, so you respond with compulsions—mental and physical behaviors that you perform to try to neutralize the thoughts. It works, temporarily, but confirms your false beliefs, trapping you in a vicious cycle.

The illness comes in various subtypes including contamination, relationships, hoarding, existential, and maternal. My obsessions are primarily focused on harm coming to others, religious scrupulosity, and moral perfection. It's not uncommon for me to send a text to a friend and have graphic images of their corpse enter uninvited into my mind when they don't respond immediately, peppered with gory details from freshman anatomy lab.

Whenever I talk to someone in a marginalized community, slurs pop into my head, and I frequently go silent, find an excuse to leave, or become effusively apologetic out of fear that I may accidentally say words that I would never mean.

I replay conversations—even the most banal—over and over to remind myself that I didn't accidentally hurt someone with my words, my tone of voice, or my body language.

I sobbed for an hour when I was deferred from giving blood once due to menstruation-induced iron deficiency, convinced that if a pint could save lives, inability to donate was akin to murder. I research every problem a loved one has, spending hours reading about breakups, nut allergies, and rare immune disorders.

One of my favorite things about Mormonism is the expansiveness of salvation, the doctrine that we can't be exalted alone, so I become convinced that I am not only responsible for my own eternal destiny, but that of everyone I love as well. During the time I spend on my knees repenting every night, faces flash before my eyes—my younger brother, my purple-haired math major friend, the two roommates who gave me a priesthood blessing when everything seemed too much—all in eternal torment. I'm simply never able to attain the standards of perfection I think I need to keep everyone safe.

Combine that with generalized anxiety disorder, where I can't stop worrying, and much of my life is entangled in desperate knots of fear. As I try to avoid everything that scares me, and the world gets smaller and smaller, but no less scary.



I finally dial the number of the anxiety clinic I was referred to a few months before. They have an opening, so I show up on a Monday at 7:15 for my 8:00 a.m. appointment. I don't want to be late and inconvenience anyone, plus I have an absolutely awful sense of direction. And who

knows what traffic would be like in an unfamiliar part of town? The building's closed this early, so I sit in the parking lot. Across the street, directly above a busy highway, is a temple—not one that I've ever been inside, but still. I know that it should give me comfort, but it just adds another reminder that God is watching all I do.

The therapist I'm assigned to listens carefully as I explain my situation, not saying a word until I've gone through every awful scenario that plays out in my head on a regular basis. She's masked due to COVID safety requirements, and I can't read her expression.

She says, "T, that must be really hard. You're so afraid of being a bad person. It drives everything you do."

I nod. My eyes are starting to fill. I can barely see her behind my fogging glasses.

"The way we treat OCD is exposure and response prevention—you're going to have to risk hurting people, hurting God, making mistakes, over and over until you get used to the fears and they start to decrease."

My muscles clench. My right knee jackhammers the couch. I say, "That sounds awful. I know other people who have done this—they said it's torture."

I can leave. I know this. I don't want to be here. But I can't walk out—I've spent too many sacrament meetings in tears because I felt unworthy, so many conversations with friends trying to laugh behind a veil of panic, so much time lost to fear.

"I know. It will be," she says.

I swallow hard. "Let's plan the torture," I say.

We start to discuss the rules I've made for myself. Many of the idiosyncrasies of my personality, it seems, are rooted less in quirkiness and more in anxiety.

"You say you never curse?"

"Well, once. A friend said something bad about himself and used a swearword. I used the same phrase back to him to negate it." A pause. "I think I made my point."

“What did you do after that?”

“I repented. But I explained to God that it was for a good reason. I figured that loving our neighbor was a greater commandment.”

She nods. “That sounds neutralizing. What would happen if you said the words now?”

“I wouldn’t. It would be bad.”

“It would make an excellent exposure for you,” she says. “Just think about it.”



The next session, I say, “I’ll swear. But not yet.”

“Could you start by just writing it down? Songs? Didn’t you say that you liked Taylor Swift’s new album? It’s explicit.”

I manage half a smile. Like many young women I know, I memorized a good chunk of the tracks on *Folklore* within a week of its release. “I could maybe do that.”

In her office I start writing down all the lyrics that I skip when singing. *Red* came out when I was in middle school, and I would always say “passion innocent” instead of “passionate as sin.” Now I write “A damn thing, honey” and “I’m on some new shit.” Finally, the big one—the snark of this line makes me laugh, but I always wonder if I’m playing the chorus too loud: “Would you tell me to go fuck myself?”

I’m shaking. I’ve tried to stay slow and steady, but my handwriting has deteriorated down the page. I want to drive away from my therapist’s office and never return. She’s talking, but I don’t hear her.

“T? How are you doing? Where is your distress, one to ten?”

I take a breath—it’s not as bad as it was a few minutes ago. “Maybe six and a half? Seven?”

“That’s a good start. But what can we do to make this more threatening for you? Share it with people? Text your friends?”

More threatening? It’s already plenty bad.

“I could send the paper to my friends.”

She tips her head to the side. “What else?”

What’s worse?

I think of the temple looming over us, a few blocks west and up a hill.

“And I could go read this at the temple.”

She nods. “That’s a plan.”



I had expected the parking lot to be empty, but it’s close to full. I have trouble finding a spot in the front section. We’re under COVID restrictions, but in the second phase of opening, so people are inside.

I curl up in the driver’s seat. I don’t want to do this. I pull out the piece of paper, snap a photo of it, and send it to four of my close friends with this message: “I’m sending this to you, someone I consider to be a faithful Latter-day Saint and very good person, without comment (but you can ask questions if you want, haha).”

I linger a second over my lock screen—my friends and I, beaming on the day of my endowment.

I glance up. People are coming out of the temple doors, masked but joyful. I see a bride and a groom holding hands. Tears bite my eyes. There’s so much love there, so much connection.

Do I deserve that?

I hadn’t expected an immediate response to any of my texts—it’s late morning, and most of my friends are in class or at work, but messages are coming in. “T I love you.” A second later, “How are you holding up?”

That’s a loaded question. I ignore it but place the phone with love on the screen in my pocket. I get out of the car, curse-covered paper in my hand.

There are too many people in front of the building. I had hoped that they would all want to leave soon, but they seem to feel the need to keep talking. I walk around the back to where it’s empty. There’s a gate, but I don’t enter. I’m close enough as I am, and already weeping. I don’t know how much more I can handle.

I look up at the temple, then down at my paper. I start to speak. “You never did—you never did give a—a damn thing, honey.” I stammer.

I try again. “You never did give a damn thing, honey.”

Someone wouldn’t be able to hear this unless they were right next to me, and they still probably couldn’t understand under my sobs.

“Faster than the wind, passionate as sin,” I say. The tightness of my throat, in some dark twist, feels exactly the same as when I was making the covenants of my endowment, when I was afraid I wasn’t speaking clearly enough to be heard by God.

I know I can’t make it through this entire list, but I try one more.

“I’m on some—on some—I’m on some new shit!”

I lose myself in a burst of tears, then run to my car. I sit in the front seat for a few minutes until I’m calm enough to drive.



I haven’t been to church in months. The rising COVID case counts make me uneasy to be in a building with so many people, and our ward isn’t offering meetings via zoom. I miss religion. Mormonism’s absence lies in a dull ache beneath my ribcage. I consider texting one of my male friends to ask for a socially distant sacrament blessing but realize that I want to experience holiness without another as a conduit.

I drive to the temple nearest my house, the closest thing I have right now to a church service. There are people milling about the busy downtown, but I beeline straight for the grounds. I sit on a bench, bowed in prayer, tears streaming down my face.

God, I plead silently, please help me. I don’t know how much more I can take.



Amid all of this, my normal life goes on. I write papers for classes and knit through zoom lectures. My roommates and I make crepes

the morning of general conference, then all pile onto one bed to watch church leadership speak to an empty audience. I make plans with my boss in a research lab to start more investigations—there's a new drug he wants us to test, and I'll be in charge of injections and some experiments. I start listening to Christmas music in early October because it makes me happy. I have lunches with friends in parks. Ten feet apart, we can still see smiles and hear laughter. I pull boots and a coat over my pajamas to dance in the first snow.



And as I go further into treatment, doing more and more things that scare me, I start to heal. One morning I'm brushing my hair and realize I look pretty without being seized by an immediate feeling of guilt that I could be focusing on things more important than my appearance, that I'm setting a bad example for young girls. I talk to friends and don't spend the next three hours panicked that I've hurt them. I send fewer random apology texts. I begin to better understand grace, both as a gift from God and as something that I can extend to myself. My prayers become conversations rather than desperate recitals of names.

I make plans for a future that I genuinely look forward to.

I begin to live in it.



I haven't gone inside the temple again, although I long to. They're closed in my area to everything except living ordinances. I can't wait to immerse myself in the ceremonies without being convinced that a small mistake will condemn everyone I love for eternity.

I went back to the grounds a few weeks ago, again bowed in prayer.

Thank you. I've been waiting my whole life for this. It's beautiful.

I will never not have OCD—it's a chronic condition, but now it's managed. Some days are harder than others, and always will be, but

it's not the determining factor in my life anymore. I still struggle with small choices. I never had the chance to make mistakes when learning how life worked, so now I have to learn it all anew as an adult. I still fall, regularly, but find it easier to trust that there are arms to catch me.

And on the good days I'm able to add to the image in my head of what heaven looks like.

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