

Talk for Faith Again  
December 6, 2019

I want to say a word about my husband Göran. He does not dig this kind of stuff. And Mormonism for the most part annoys him. But he understands that this journey that I am on right now and that I'm here to speak with you about, I'm on because of my profound love for him and my devotion to him. And so he puts up with it with a lot of grace, and I'm happy to have him here. We had an experience on the flight to Utah that I want to share with you that I think tells a lot about the kind of person he is. We were sitting at the very back of the plane, and I was in the window seat and he was in the middle seat and there was an elderly, red haired woman sitting on the aisle seat next to him. Now, of course, we were on a plane to Utah, so you never know what kind of person that is sitting in the aisle seat. But in his usual fearless way he struck up a conversation with her and soon they were swapping fashion tips, he was showing her pictures of his various ensembles and then they started talking about their respective kids. Göran is a typical proud parent who loves to tell people all about our smart, good looking, accomplished son Glen, who right out of college got a job working for the city of Minneapolis and who, by the way, is gay and married to a wonderful man. And Göran and the red haired elderly stranger completely bonded. After we had retrieved our luggage from the baggage claim area and were about to head out to meet my dad, Göran said, "wait! I want to say goodbye to Mary Beth!" He dashed back into the baggage claim area and gave his new friend a big hug. That's the kind of person he is.

I had a dream about us last night. Göran is the most common frequenter of my dreams. I keep a dream journal where I've recorded almost 1700 dreams, and he appears in about a third of them. In the dream that I had last night we had stolen into an exclusive country club, and had to dodge an angry, racist maître d' in order to retrieve a couple of maps that would reveal to us very important things about our relationship. One map had to do with the spiritual aspect of our relationship, and the other map with the physical aspect. I spend a lot of time puzzling over these kinds of things, and Göran is my indispensable partner in figuring them out. And we do, simply by remaining committed to face all of life's challenges together. That is the kind of person I am, and that is how we are.

I want to start by talking about my testimony.

I encountered a comment in social media the other day that suggested belief in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was the result of some kind of psychological need to be "right," to be "superior." Rational people don't believe in the Church. Spiritually evolved, humble people reject the idea of "one true church." I'd like to make the case for one true church, without the scare quotes.

Most of the people I know who have a testimony of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints were surprised to learn it was the true Church of Jesus Christ. Their spiritually evolved, rational selves viscerally rejected the notion for a pile of reasons. The Book of Mormon couldn't possibly have any historical basis. Polygamy. Women's issues. The race issue. The treatment of LGBTQ people. Or that there are too few Latter-day Saints and the Church a too pitiful, small and imperfect vehicle for God to use to bring about the salvation of the whole planet. Because the idea of one true church or one chosen people made some people superior and everybody else inferior, and for that reason alone was odious and offensive.

Most people that I know who have come to accept this notion initially rejected it for one or more of these reasons. In my own case, I strongly rejected it. I rejected it with all the force and every fiber of my being. Many of the reasons I've just cited held currency for me, not the least of which was that it seemed clear to me that there was no place for me in the church as a gay man.

I came to accept it against reason. And the process of accepting it, far from somehow being a way to affirm my superiority or rightness involved humbling myself, accepting my smallness and wrongness. Accepting that I am a sinner. There were a few phrases that ring true for me in the early stages of that process for me. One was “it is hard for you to kick against the goads” (Acts 26:14). Another was “Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere; I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked” (Psalm 84:10).

If I had a yearning for anything, it was a yearning for the peace and the joy that infuse my life in the presence of the Holy Spirit. God invited me personally and directly to come back to The Church of Jesus Christ of latter day Saints. At first, I assumed that God had some purpose for me there other than because it was the true church. Because the one thing I was absolutely convinced of was that that could not be. What I discovered was that, while the Spirit could be with me every day of my life, the church was a very special meeting place between me and God. It became the best school in which to be tutored by God. And beautiful gifts of the spirit were manifested to me through the priesthood of God that was held by mortal and fallible men. Gifts of prophecy. Gifts of healing. Gifts of comfort. Gifts of light, knowledge, and understanding. These were gifts it was clear to me that came directly from God, but also by the intermediary of women and men.

I will offer one fairly recent example. At the end of June of this year, the Affirmation board terminated me as executive director. Without getting into a lot of detail about how this happened, and without getting into speculation about why this happened the way it did, it is sufficient to say what this came as a shock, a deep shock, to me personally, and it felt like a betrayal. For a good part of last summer, I was in a state of grieving the loss of something that I had put my heart and soul into for the previous seven years. Not to mention but I found myself in my late 50s having to re-think my career path, something I had not expected to have to do. I expected to give the rest of my life to the cause of LGBTQ people in the Church of Jesus Christ in this capacity, as executive director of Affirmation.

Experiencing anxiety about what my future would hold, and finding myself sinking into a depression, I reached out to my ministering brother to ask for a priesthood blessing. His name is Jon. My ministering brother Jon, an extraordinary individual about whom I could spend the rest of my time tonight telling about my relationship to, responded affirmatively, and asked if it would be OK to bring another individual to help administer the blessing, a brother who, for now, I'll name simply as Brother L.

I want to tell you a little bit more about Brother L. and the history of his relationship with me. He is a conventionally orthodox and conventionally pious member of my conventionally orthodox and conventionally pious ward. People have occasionally accused me of belonging to a “liberal“ ward. It is not, and on the handful of occasions I have shared that speculation with members of my ward, they laugh. My ward is go-by-the-book, come-follow-me-curriculum orthodox. The inner-city ward in Minneapolis, it is composed of a very diverse group of poor, of working class, of university students, and of well-to-do professionals, of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, with a mix of Minnesota native converts and Utah transplants, the former heavily outweighing the latter. Our sacrament meetings and auxiliary meetings tend to stay focused on the basics of the gospel. And both my ministering brother Jon and Brother L. are representative examples. When I have asked members of my ward how it is that for the last 14 years they have extended a warm welcome to an individual who is gay, excommunicated, and in a same-sex marriage, their response across-the-board has simply been, “We just live the Gospel.”

Brother L. was a member of the bishopric when I became active in my ward in 2005. And when word reached the bishopric that an openly gay, excommunicated gay man in a same-sex marriage had begun attending, I could feel the tension in the sanctuary as he glared at me from the rostrum. For a long time, his interactions with me remained brusque and perfunctory. I told myself, it's because he doesn't know why I'm here. In his shoes, I might be suspicious as well. He just needs to get to know the real me,

beyond the bare facts about me he's been told. And so it was. The thaw between him and me probably began through his wife and mother-in-law who used to sit right in front of me in the pews at the back of the sanctuary. They took notice of my singing voice, and the fervor with which I sang the hymns each week. Gradually, over the course of Sunday School and Priesthood meeting interactions, Brother L. came to appreciate that I was there for more or less the same reasons he was, to grow in my discipleship to Jesus Christ. And instead of suspicious glares, I came to be greeted with smiles, warm handshakes, and inquiries into my well being.

Brother L. and I have never discussed the elephant in the sanctuary, about me being gay and same-sex married and excommunicated and active in the church for going on 15 years. I've had occasional conversations about the gay elephant with members of my ward over the years, including in the lobby of the temple, where I stood vigil in support of a friend of mine, Brother E., who was black, bisexual and had been reinstated into membership after being excommunicated for a time. Brother E. had come back to the church after decades of inactivity spurred in part because of family opposition to him being involved in a church that had discriminated against black people. Another member of the ward named Matthew who was there to support Brother E. as well asked me why I didn't do whatever was necessary in order to make myself worthy to enter the temple again, meaning, why didn't I leave my husband. And we had a holy conversation in which I explained to him that the rites of the temple could have no meaning to me if I couldn't bring my life companion there and be sealed to him. The Spirit was present there in the Gentiles' court of the Temple, and once I'd explained it, Matthew understood. I'd had other, similar, conversations with other members of my ward over the years, some in their homes after being invited to dinner, some with missionaries come into my home to practice the discussions on me, some on service project road trips (delivering food to the needy from the bishop's storehouse), some in the lobbies of the ward meetinghouse in between meetings, several with four different bishops and two stake presidents in their offices. But Brother L. was not one of the ones I'd ever had that conversation with.

All I knew about Brother L. was that over the years we had grown in our love and respect for one another through myriad Sunday School and Priesthood discussions. One day, particularly touched by the Spirit during a Priesthood meeting closing prayer, I wept, tears running down my bowed face and dripping onto the carpet. Brother L. was sitting next to me, and after the Amen, he put his arm around me and gave me a long hug, and we both wept.

I didn't know what kind of blessing Brother L. would give me, but I trusted that Brother L. was in tune enough with the Spirit for the blessing to come from the Lord. And that was good enough for me.

I don't think Brother L. would be offended when I say that he is a soft spoken man, and a man of few and simple words. Through the vehicle of Brother L.'s down-to-earth phrases, the Lord expressed his love for and pride in me, his satisfaction with my life, his gratitude for my efforts to bring succor to the LGBT community and for my service in Affirmation, and promises of physical health, and relief from the oppression of depression and stress. He also matter-of-factly stated that I would soon have a job.

If Brother L. personally knew that, I didn't at the time. I do remember going for a walk some time later, and the Spirit confirming that promise, and me feeling anxious and stressed and having a difficult time believing it. And the Spirit said to me very clearly: enjoy this time of not knowing. You don't often have this kind of opportunity to walk by faith. But everything told me and promised me in that blessing that was demonstrable has shown itself to be absolutely true. By early September I had a great job offer, without which I couldn't afford to be here now. And so I trust the indemonstrable parts of the blessing too, in the way one could trust what Christ said, "But that ye may know that the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins, (he saith to the sick of the palsy,)... Arise, and take up thy bed, and go thy way..." (Mark 2: 10-11).

This story is typical of the kind of miracles I experience woven into the fabric of my participation in the Church of Jesus Christ. The most basic and the most important and the most central miracle of the gospel is the miracle of repentance, of learning, of growth. And the most important way we experience this miracle is communally. I have learned that my salvation requires not merely that I grow as an individual, but that I grow in my relationships with people like Brother L. or my ministering brother Jon, or Matthew, or Bro. E. They have taught me lessons of patience, humility, and reliance on our Savior. In the process, there has been forged a most marvelous love that unites our hearts and our minds, even as we learn to let go of the things we don't know and we can't control. That's a key element of faith.

I don't know if my words alone can convey adequately the sweetness and the power and the radiance in these relationships and interactions, or my sense of the miraculous in them. If the Spirit is present, and if you feel it, you might be able to appreciate in some degree how it feels to me to walk this path. The Spirit was present in the giving and the receiving of that blessing. The Spirit gave weight and context to the love that was expressed through those hands placed upon my head and through simple, sometimes halting, seeking, compassionate words that were spoken.

And there may have been a miracle of prophecy in that story. Maybe some folks will look at that story and say it was just optimism, combined with luck. And after all John GW is not as unemployable as he thought he was. But there were lessons that I learned through trusting the prophecy in that blessing. Maybe that's the main reason why God gives us the gift of prophecy. There's a contingent element in prophecy, that always makes it a steppingstone of hope, teaching us faith. Even when prophecies seem to fail.

That's what my testimony is and how it works.

So if I may, I'd like to discuss the gay elephant a bit more. It could be any elephant really, it doesn't particularly have to be gay. Let the elephant stand for whatever it is in your life or your faith journey that seems to be blocking the path of faith in such a way that you can't get around it. It's stinky, it blocks your view, it won't move no matter how much you push it. And of course nobody wants to talk about it. And it makes you just want to run away, to abandon the path so you don't have to deal with the elephant. I won't try to define it for you further than that except to admit that my elephant has always been gay.

And what I have to say about it is that the most profound, the most love-filled and miraculous gifts that life has to offer us lie on the path that goes on, the other side of that elephant. So if you want the best that life has to offer, you have to make friends with the elephant.

The LGBTQ conundrum as I have best been able to discern this far in my life — and my perspective on this may yet change and grow — has to do with a seemingly irresolvable conflict between a gospel and a church that we love deeply, and a doctrine currently held up by many leaders and members of the church as essential to our exaltation — all of that — and something core about who we are, what our gender is or who we are able to build a life partnership with. And that conflict is so intense, we feel it so deeply, that at times it feels as if we are losing our sanity. Many of us are driven to such a deep despair that we see no way forward but to take our lives. Is that a good summary?

There don't appear to be any easy answers to this conundrum. Plenty of us find answers and they seem simple enough to us, but not compelling enough to enough people, or to the right people, for us to have resolved it at this time. And what I can say in terms of my own life journey, to sort of summarize the nature of the conundrum, is that I spent the first two decades of my life nurtured by the gospel, raised by goodly parents, and learning extraordinary things, and finding the only resolution between my burgeoning sexuality and this precious thing, this precious gospel, being to reject my sexuality, to deny it, to repress

it, to pray and to be the best Latter-day Saint I possibly could be, believing that that would erase my sexuality. But it didn't. And I spent the next two decades of my life abandoning the church, trying to repress it, trying to deny it, hoping that by living a good, happy, gay life I could erase the Church from my life. And I was nurtured and taught by my relationship with Göran. He has taught me what love and connection and family are and I have been so incredibly blessed. But ultimately I found that I could not repress or deny or ignore my testimony of the Gospel anymore than I could my sexuality.

So here I am coming toward the end of the third vicennial of my life, a time where I have accepted a challenge from the Spirit, and have engaged in an "experiment upon the word". I have fully embraced both of those aspects of myself, and have sought to let each inform me without censorship, without doubting, without second-guessing myself. Just fully accepting both the gospel and my relationship with my husband, and being consciously in relationship with Jesus Christ in the process, letting my relationship with him as my teacher and healer guide me in dealing with the seeming contradictions.

That's not necessarily any easier an answer than the first two answers that I tried. Outwardly, I'm still excommunicated, and Christ's stewards on earth have if anything widened the hedge around the doctrine that would keep me from full fellowship in the Church as long as I keep the promises I've made my husband. But, I've learned, this is the nature of the walk of faith. You trust what God has given you and you continue in patience. And inwardly at least, it works. Here's the thing about Heaven, about "pie in the sky". There's always, this side of the veil, a fullness waiting for you just around the corner. In this life there's never any fullness. It's just "over there." Except inwardly. If you're on the path to Heaven, you always carry something of Heaven inside of you. So you don't have to wait for the fullness. God is with you, Right here, right now. You are already in his presence, and inwardly enjoying the fullness that there you will outwardly and perfectly.

But to keep that bit of Heaven inside you, you have to stay on the path. There's just no way around it. We suffer a lot because we want a perfect resolution now on our terms. We get impatient, we get angry, and we drive the spirit away trying to force resolution on terms that make sense to us. When we do that we lose the opportunity to be taught by God.

A lot of us want to solve the LGBTQ conundrum by force, by political means. We think that there is no integrity in the position our church leaders have taken, and so we think the solution is to politically pressure them, using humiliation in the media or critical mass at the ballot box. But if God is real, and if the Gospel is true, then if we could win in that way, it would be a hollow victory. We would get our way at the expense of apostasy. And if there is no God, or if the Gospel is not true in the way we thought it was, then it's better to let it go. Find our peace somewhere else.

There's no solution to the conundrum by worldly means. It not a problem we can solve politically. We could be Saul, kicking against the pricks, bloodying our shanks by trying to solve a spiritual problem politically.

Or instead we could be Abraham, yearning for the blessings of the fathers, and entering into a spiritual quest. This is, I believe, the only ultimate solution to the conundrum. To enter into a quest of faith, that requires us to humble ourselves and to listen to God and then proceed in faith.

Faith is not popular. If you're going to go with God, there will be long stretches of road where it's just you and him. You have to be prepared to go it alone sometimes, to feel the sting of loneliness even when you are in a room full of people who supposedly love you. Faith can be like that because it often teaches us to lay down our arms when everybody else is shouting for war. Sometimes faith calls us to stand up and take issue when everybody is calling for uniformity and silence. The only way you'll know when is the right time to do what is to pay attention to God. That takes practice and humility and patience.

Faith can be lonely. And yet, Faith yearns for fellowship. It yearns for fellow travelers from whom we can learn. I am grateful for those who have been my fellow travelers. I invite you to be fellow travelers, that we might experience the joys and the costs of discipleship together.

In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.