

On Remaining within or Leaving Mormonism: Different Perspectives

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<http://mccue.cc/bob/spirituality.htm>

A person will worship something, have no doubt about that. We may think our tribute is paid in secret in the dark recesses of our hearts, but it will out. That which dominates our imaginations and our thoughts will determine our lives, and our character. Therefore, it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming. Ralph Waldo Emerson:

Introduction

I recently read Linda Hoffman Kimball's article "Staying Power" at http://www.beliefnet.com/story/132/story_13219_1.html and wrote the following in response. It was posted on a couple of internet bulletin boards on which I participate and sent to Linda by email for her comment.

My Response to Linda

I can recognize a disciple of Gene England when I see one. Linda Hoffman Kimball is most surely from that camp. And I have a lot of respect for our dear departed Gene. The man lived life wide open; spoke from his heart; believed with all his heart; must have had a God spot in his brain bigger than my whole head.

If the Mormon Church eventually becomes broad minded and tolerant enough to permit people like Linda (or me) to be themselves when they attend church; to share what is most important to them; to speak openly at church and elsewhere of the things she hints at in her article; to keep the real paradox and simply toss falsehood out the door, then I will say that on balance the Mormon Church brings more good than ill to the world. Until then, my position will remain that Mormonism is something that the vast majority of humanity is better off without, and I will do what little I can to reduce its influence.

As things now stand, a Mormon who sees useful metaphor in some Mormon belief (as well as most forms of spiritual belief) and likes associating with those nice, casserole bearing neighbours Linda mentioned, but does not accept the revisionist history of Mormonism (or the revisionist history of Christianity for that matter - the same issues gut the literalist position within both traditions) is in a tight spot. Such a person is likely to live a life comprised much more of pretence than is healthy. Most of us who have experienced this would say that it is between difficult and impossible to speak openly to family and friends - let alone religious leaders - about what we believe without being exorcised. It is even difficult to teach our children what we believe without putting their community membership in de facto jeopardy. Imagine an innocent child in Primary who gives metaphoric responses (which I have found are intuitive to children - they take to this like ducks to water if introduced early enough) to their literalist teachers. Expect the entire Primary Presidency, and perhaps the Bishopric, on your doorstep in short order and if you are honest with them, a "Court of Love" (Mormon disciplinary hearing) soon

thereafter. That is the road I went down.

Linda says, "Any call to spiritual life is not for the faint of heart. Paradox is an important principle." I say that you can justify almost anything if you sufficiently want it or fear its opposite, and a lot of paradox is false. It feels like having a clamp removed from your head, for example, when you stop trying to justify that lying, womanizing Joseph Smith as "second only to Jesus Christ" in terms of the good he has done for mankind, and when you recognize his various works of fiction (the books of Mormon, Moses and Abraham, among them) for what they are instead of rationalize against the preponderance of evidence that they are the voice of God himself. Paradox and irony are at the heart of much of life and motivate most of what is at humanity's artistic pinnacle. It demeans both life and art to call Mormon falsehood "paradox". And, this strengthens the hand of the mostly well intended deceivers who teach young Mormons half (or less) true, and hence highly misleading, stories and send them out to convert the world to Mormonism.

So Linda, if you want for whatever reason to remain with the innocents who continue to look inward and react in fear to most of what differs from their narrow worldview, regardless of beauty or merit, then help yourself. Or if you fear losing the association of those same people; or fear not being in Joseph Smith's Celestial Kingdom, then have at it. However, I left Mormonism entirely, and have never been so happy to see something in my rear view mirror. After over two years in clear skies I am still regularly surprised by moments of joy and relief so palpable they stop me in my tracks, so wonderful is this world I have discovered outside of Mormonism. And these feelings come most frequently at times when only a little over two years ago I would have been sitting in some mind-numbing Mormon meeting.

Linda, I don't begrudge you your choice. You have made it for whatever reasons you have, and seem to be well informed. Good for you. And I think it is helpful that you publish your experience as you have. The more we learn of the diversity of human experience, the better. That is one of the many things the Mormon Church so effectively squelches within its walls - the communication of what people actually experience as opposed to what Mormonism tells them they must experience.

You are likely familiar with Fowler's "Stages of Faith" analysis. Mormonism actively suppresses progress from the literalistic, narrow forms of faith and moral reasoning that characterize adolescents in many cultures (including ours), toward the more pluralistic forms of spirituality that many people identify with maturity, and in my view are becoming more important in our shrinking world. It seems that you have made it out of the literalist stage, and yours is a welcome, moving in the right direction, voice within the faithful Mormon community.

However, I would say to you that your message plays straight into the hands of those whose continuing influence, and in many cases income, depends upon keeping the "faithful" blinded and in chains. Many of those faithful, already well-conditioned with fear of anything that questions Mormonism, will hear your voice and think "Thank goodness!

Someone has been to the borderlands, has looked across the line into Mordor, and says I don't have to do that myself!" And so they won't go, and will not have the chance to discover the life transforming experience that for many Mormons can only occur in that seemingly dark and dangerous territory. For a seeming eternity (that word does have some legitimate uses) – that is, until age 44 – I was in that fearful crowd and voices like yours helped to keep me there. I now think ill of those who misled me, whether innocently or not. They held themselves out as far seeing and more experienced than me, and persuaded me that they had seen and done, and so I needed not. They cost me dearly.

And by the way, the view you express is closely related to what many people consider to be the silly side of post modern thought. "Nothing is certain, so if Mormonism works for you (or seems from your subjective viewpoint to do so) you don't need to change." Etc. I used to be amazed at how quickly intelligent Mormons could paradigm shift from absolute, monist certainty ("Mormonism is God's one and only true church on the face of the Earth!") to the utter relativism implicit in your view. After reading reams of the psychology of cognitive dissonance and related matters, I now have some understanding of how and why this occurs. It is a human phenomenon as old as dirt.

If you want to remain within Mormonism, that is great. But I suggest that you are in error to explicitly or implicitly discourage those who feel discomfort with their Mormon tradition from taking a trip to the border to feel the sun on their faces and breeze in their hair for the first time, as frightening as that may seem to them. Think of an Amish teenager venturing into the city for the same time. It is the same thing. I do not suggest that you intend to do so, but as one who would have been so discouraged only a short time ago by things similar to what you wrote, I can assure you that will be the effect of your words on many people. And as you might have guessed by now, I am not one of the sheep. I was one of the leaders. But my bifurcated Mormon mind was such that the effect I just described people like you having on me was powerful.

I think you should consider inviting those inclined among your faithful listeners to fight through their fear, and come to explore with you. You should tell them how wonderful the water is where you swim, and invite them to hop in. And then express again the love you eloquently did for both those who stay, and those whose agency you have expanded (speaking of what Joseph Smith at least pretended to do) and who do what I have done – leave and feel more grateful for having done so than for anything else they have ever experienced. The ones who leave will in particular bless your name.

My thoughts respecting the Mormon experience are recorded at <http://mccue.cc/bob/spirituality.htm> I am not an authority of any kind. Just one guy who had an experience. I share my views because of my belief that the more we hear and understand the voices of others, the more we understand our own. I am also trying to return the favour to those whose voices helped me as I made my fearful struggle toward the fringes of Mormonism a few years ago after having served as a Mormon Bishop and in a host of other leadership positions. I resigned as Stake Mission President about two and a half years ago. I have seen this thing from just about every angle conceivable,

and now see if from the outside. That is the angle that in my view it looks best.