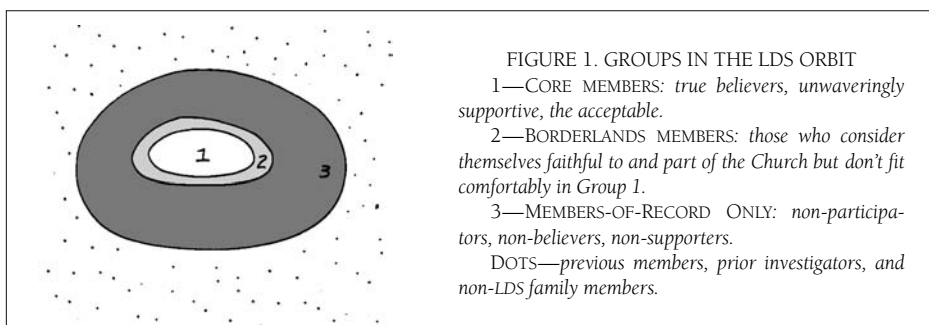


BRAVING THE BORDERLANDS . . .

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES IN
THE BORDERLANDS

By D. Jeff Burton



MY LAST COLUMN explored the prospects for developing and maintaining a well-exposed, “faith-based” LDS personal religion (in contrast to a “testimony-based” one). I also promised to share experiences of Borderlanders.¹ Knowing that others are having experiences similar to ours and understanding how others have successfully (and unsuccessfully) dealt with problems can be useful.

Several good folks have stepped forward to share their stories. However, given the bravery of these kind souls, and based on questions many have posed about me and my reasons for sponsoring this column, it seems only fair that I share a few of my own experiences first, the sublime with the ridiculous.

First, my basic stats: Age sixty-two, happily married to a soul mate, four children; degrees in mechanical engineering and environmental health; consulting engineer, author; typical LDS upbringing; mission to Japan; high priest; have served in various callings including branch president, counselor in two bishoprics, stake high councilman; “asked in” twice to explain myself about Church-related writings; currently “less active” in my home ward; consider myself supportive and faithful to the Church; trying to be a good LDS Christian.

Second, how did I migrate into the

Borderlands? The journey began in my childhood. As a young child, I remember my mother pointing out a famous painting that adorned many LDS chapels of that era—Joseph Smith kneeling before God and Christ who are floating in the air above him. I immediately thought that God and Jesus couldn't be floating in the air for their feet were pointed straight ahead like they were standing on an invisible platform. Wouldn't their feet hang down? My feet hung down when someone lifted me up. That is my earliest recollection of the questioning (even skeptical) nature that became an essential part of my personality.

Through my childhood and teenage years, I listened to the authorities in my life talking about the importance and inevitability of receiving a “testimony” from the ultimate authorities: God and the Holy Ghost. Yes, I wanted one—at that age who wants to be outside the group? Like every boy growing up in the Ensign Ward, I thought I'd be a General Authority when I grew up. Of course I needed a testimony of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon. And think how exciting it would be! Nothing came, however, during those years. “Perhaps it will come during my mission,” I thought when I turned twenty and got my call to Japan.

As you've guessed, no unshakable testimony of Joseph Smith materialized during

my mission either. Rather, an insatiable intellectual curiosity about the mode and function of belief, faith, and testimony began to build in me. While serving in the Sendai Branch, I wrote and distributed a questionnaire to the members, all of whom—in those early days of the Church in Japan—had been converted to Mormonism as teenagers or adults. Among other things, I asked about how they had been converted, their levels of belief, and whether or not they had received some spiritual or metaphysical message about the truthfulness of the Church and Joseph Smith. Of about thirty persons responding, only one claimed to have received a divine-origin “testimony.” Most were silently struggling with the issue of testimony and their beliefs, just like me.² It comforted me to know that others were sailing in the same boat as I was, but I also felt sad that they couldn't express their feelings openly. I also wondered if this was the case the world over.

A divine testimony of the Church never came after my mission either; but I stayed active and obedient, got my education, married in the temple, started an engineering consulting business, and throughout my twenties and early thirties, explored with others issues of faith, belief, and testimony. I found others who privately held the same testimony experience as I.³

Jump forward to a thirty-five-year-old family and career man. One afternoon on a business trip, I had an epiphany. “I am a skeptic from my DNA out, and it isn't going away—and I'm not getting a testimony of Joseph Smith.” Once that revelation became clear, I stopped expecting to get a “testimony.” I relaxed. And I was fully in the Borderlands. It actually turned out to be a good thing. (There are pros and cons associated with the LDS “testimony,” which we'll explore in future columns.)

SO, how have I dealt with my Borderland status? Here are six things I have found, literally through trial and error, that work pretty well for me.

1. *I try not to let my problem (a questioning and skeptical nature) ruin my life or my relationships.* I soon found out that there were groups, publications, and university programs devoted to hardy skeptics like me.⁴ I also learned that skepticism must be properly defined and managed. Left unchecked, skepticism can result in rejecting good ideas and the development of growth-retarding cynicism.⁵ As I embrace it, skepticism is a healthy but controlled curiosity. This positive form of skepticism takes a provisional ap-

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proach and applies reason and logic to claims, ideas, and phenomena. For example, even though four million websites claim that pyramids held over the body or magnets held against the skin provide healing, I neither accept nor reject these claims; but I do ask for evidence, or reason and logic, to show how pyramids or low-powered magnetic fields could affect body systems. In the absence of positive evidence, or convincing reason and logic, I generally withhold belief. (And I save a lot of money by not buying plastic pyramids, crystals, and magnetic shoe inserts.)

Healthy skepticism is a method, not a position, as suggested by Michael Shermer, author of a skeptics column in *Scientific American* and publisher of *Skeptic Magazine*. It provides a methodology for filtering out unwarranted and harmful claims and ideas. Through this approach, a claim can graduate to knowledge or fact after it has been tested or confirmed, or at least backed up by convincing reason or logic. Water witching, also known as dousing, is a quasi-religious claim that has repeatedly failed all appropriate scientific tests. So until better supportive evidence has been produced, it is reasonable to withhold belief, despite personal and anecdotal testimonials, such as, “It worked on my property in Santaquin.”

Thus I approach all claims with an open mind that they might be true or real, but I expect to see compelling evidence or good reason and logic before I am willing to “believe.”⁶ I also generally adhere to Occam’s Razor—“The simple explanation is most likely the correct one.” This approach doesn’t mean that I’m not willing to accept things on faith, or that not enough evidence has yet been gathered, or that it might not be testable; but I am less likely to accept a claim if it has no evidence to support it, or especially if it has evidence to refute it. For example, because the clear evidence is just not there, I withhold belief in the claim that Brigham Young sanctioned the killings at Mountain Meadows.

As for strictly spiritual claims and ideas, I am generally willing to accept less-than-scientific testing. Personal experience and sound reasoning and logic are enough for me to at least accept a claim or tenet on faith. For

example, I accept the possibility that unencumbered prayer and anointing of the sick can have a positive or healing effect.⁷ Yet despite breathless reports in the *Reader’s Digest*, no authentic and thorough scientific study has yet been able to adequately test such claims. (But the converse is also true.)

So as far as religion is concerned, personal experience and faith have been valuable partners to my innate skepticism. Perhaps that is why I champion faith and urge those without a “testimony” to fall back on faith when testing is inadequate. In most other religions, faith is a primary focus; the concept of universally held testimony is not even considered. In early LDS tradition, “faith” was a first principle as declared, for example, in Joseph Smith’s Fourth Article of Faith. Have we lost our connection to that important principle in these late latter days?

2. *I try to see and accept my situation as a positive thing.* One of my favorite scriptures, also discussed in last issue’s column, is worth amplifying here:

To some it is given to know that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. . . .

To others it is given to believe on their words, that they also might have eternal life if they continue faithful (D&C 46:13–14).

This scripture is but one of several verses in Section 46 which list gifts God grants to individuals. “To know” that Jesus is the Son of God is one gift, and I take the second promise to be a gift as well. So I routinely thank God in my prayers for the gift of healthy skepticism and the gift of faith. In some strange way, I feel it is better (for me, anyway) to have an “unsure” life of skepticism and open curiosity, which drives me to learn and study about all facets of life, than have the narrow, fearful approach some strong testimony-bearing members seem to have.⁸

3. *I try to go along with everything in the Church but, where appropriate, I alter things to make it easier for me.* When I went on my mission, for example, I asked to go to Japan partly because I would be asking people to convert to the Christian way of thinking and doing.⁹ I felt comfortable doing so and had good success.¹⁰ As it turned out, the Japanese word used most often to bear testimony in

those days, *shinjiru*, has the connotation of “to believe” and “to think,” not “to know.” That made it easier for me to “bear my testimony.” Today, my “testimony” in English revolves around the worth of Christ’s recipes for happy living and the testable religious tenets.¹¹

The temple experience is one that I used to find somewhat tedious and its motivations murky. I can’t go into the issues here, but let me share an example of how I’ve dealt with the temple experience to make it easier for me. It is common knowledge that we make certain covenants when we go the temple. Again, I can’t go into details here, but you temple-goers know what I’m talking about. I don’t find the covenants quite wide-ranging enough for me. So when I raise my arm to the square, I generally think to add personal covenants. For example, I like to consecrate myself to Christ and his teachings, and I like to promise to be faithful to my wife and children. This makes the temple experience a richer one for me and helps me to overcome the reticence I have about going.

4. *I don’t hesitate to volunteer (or even ask) for callings that interest me.* During the 1980s, I was a member of our stake high council and had access to information about new Church programs being tested in trial stakes. There was a new program sponsored by the then-LDS Social Services (LDSSS, now LDS Family Services) to provide another layer of social services between the stakes and LDSSS. The idea was to train lay counselors in the stake as a service to bishops, who could get quicker and local help for “troubled” ward members.

I asked our stake president if we could become one of those test stakes and I be the leader. He agreed, and I began a wonderful calling. Over several years, we expanded the program to include calling and training one couple in each ward as lay counselors; establishing half-way houses in each ward to assist, for example, runaway children and abused wives; training bishops in effective counseling; providing couples communication classes; and of course, providing counseling for people bishops referred to us. We sent the difficult cases on to LDSSS, but most of the time, we were able to shepherd people through the six to eight weeks people nor-

My stake president called me into his office (my first “call-in”) and said I had to be released from the high council

mally need to get through a crisis. I met with many troubled people during those years, many of whom could be described as Borderlanders in some way.

5. *I try to speak up or ask questions when I see something that seems amiss or needs information or clarification.* As audacious as it sounds, in the mid-1980s, I rewrote the creation story, as presented in the Pearl of Great Price, as a short screenplay. (I was careful not to include references to the sacred parts of the temple ceremony which, as is well known, also includes the creation story.)

While amateurish, the screenplay was positive, uplifting, and encouraging. It was to include beautiful music and so forth. Anyway, I sent it to two General Authorities and asked for their thoughts and if it were permissible to publish it. My unspoken motive, as naive as this sounds, was to show them that the creation story could be written to be uplifting and interesting and to emphasize some beautiful truths that are not generally thought about.¹²

I didn't necessarily expect them to encourage me to publish the piece, but I certainly didn't expect what actually happened. My stake president called me into his office (my first “call-in”) and said that as a result of a telephone call he had received “from downtown,” I had to be released from the high council. At the time, I was serving as the stake leader of the lay counseling project mentioned before. The stake president wanted me to continue in that calling and also to continue speaking with the high council at the monthly talks to the wards. He was a wonderful man, and I believe he was genuinely dismayed at what he had to do. But he was also now a little unsure about exactly who I was and what I was about, even though we had talked about my skeptical nature. This experience taught me that I needed to be more upfront with those who need to know about my “faith vs. testimony” experience.

6. *I allow all others to develop personal religions and relationships with God in whatever way works best for them.* Some very good people relate to God through the Church and have strong testimonies. Some hold fast to their Iron Rods, and others follow their Liahonas. Perfectly fine. Some leave and be-

come Buddhists. Also okay, though it seems unfortunate they couldn't find a pathway in Mormonism. The Church once sponsored a program for young men called, “One boy, one program.” It stressed the idea of tailoring a “program” for each boy based on that boy's nature, needs, and talents. I think it possible that God has, in principle, a “one person, one program” approach for every human being on earth. Who am I to interfere?

MY column space is up. Those are only a few of my many experiences in the Borderlands—some serious, some funny, and a few weird. I invite you to share your experiences, too. In the next few columns, I'll present the stories of other Borderlanders who have written to me about their experiences. 📧

NOTES

1. In my first column, I introduced the Borderland member as one who may have an unusual but LDS-compatible outlook on life; a distinctive way of thinking about faith, belief and testimony; a different view of LDS history; some open questions about a particular aspect of the Church; reduced or modified activity; or feelings of not meeting Group 1 acceptability criteria. See Figure 1.

2. Major reasons reported for joining included (1) liked the missionaries, (2) had friends at church, (3) wanted to learn English, (4) wanted to be with Americans, and (5) liked the Christian approach.

3. My first essay on the subject, presented at the 1982 Sunstone Symposium and later published in *SUNSTONE* (Sept.–Oct. 1982, 34), “The Phenomenon of the Closet Doubter,” explained one aspect of the experience many go through as they struggle with testimony issues and as they “come out.”

4. The Committee for the Scientific Investigation of the Claims of the Paranormal (CISCOPE) publishes *Skeptical Inquirer* and sponsors symposia and other intellectual and scientific pursuits. The Skeptics Society (of which I am a member) publishes the *Skeptic Magazine*. Both organizations champion the scientific method and tend to concentrate on paranormal claims and activities that can harm individuals and society—medical quackery, UFO abduction accounts, false memory syndrome, alternative medicine sold over the internet, “creation science,” and other inappropriate uses of science. Neither organization takes on religion except when it is used to relieve innocent people of their money, e.g., fraudulent televangelist healers who require “donations.”

5. Older and negative definitions for “skeptical” include cynical, mistrusting, doubtful, dubious, incredulous, suspicious, disbelieving, and unbelieving.

6. For the definitions I use for “belief,” “faith,” “knowledge,” and “testimony,” see my last column, “Can a ‘Faith-Based’ Personal Religion Find a Home in a ‘Testimony-Based’ Church?,” *SUNSTONE* (Oct. 2003): 64–66.

7. Many (non-LDS) churchmen use “healing of the sick” to make money, to gain power, or to pursue some other goal beyond the simple and humble desire to help. This fact of life is an excellent example of where skepticism can be a valuable tool.

8. Last Christmas, I gave thirty-one of my friends and family members gift subscriptions to *SUNSTONE*. Some will not read it out of fear that it might be detrimental.

9. There was no place on the application papers to make a request. My bishop penciled my request across the top of the form, and the selection process honored my desire.

10. My companions and I were blessed with sixty baptisms while I served, a few of whom have remained active. Others, while inactive, have adopted Christian and Mormon ways of thinking and doing (as I learned while meeting with some of them on a trip to Japan ten years ago).

11. Religious claims and tenets not easily testable include such things as: God having a body, life after death, the existence of heaven and hell, Joseph Smith's visions, the restoration of the “true church” in the latter day. Testable claims include any related to personal behavior, such as: honesty, honoring our parents, sharing, and doing unto others.

12. A somewhat revised version of the screenplay, “Adam and Eve: The Dawn of Consciousness and the Birth of Faith” appeared in the first edition of my book, *For Those Who Wonder*. I dropped it in subsequent editions to make way for more recent and useful essays.

Please send me any
of your thoughts,
experiences, or tales
from life in the
Borderlands.

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