

Pillars of other people's faith

PAINFUL BUT NECESSARY

SIX DEVOUT MORMON INTELLECTUALS

SHARE THEIR CRISIS OF FAITH STORIES

By Matt Connelly

(An early version of this article was presented at the Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium, August 2008.)

ON A DARK, COLD NIGHT IN 2002, I SAT LIMPLY at my desk, head hanging down. “What if there is no God?” I said to myself. “What if there is no afterlife? What if death really is the end?” Darkness engulfed me as I pondered the cold, hard implications of these possibilities. “Could it be that my entire theological paradigm is wrong?” “Is it possible that the cosmology I have embraced as a Mormon Christian is not, in fact, a reality?”

I had believed in Mormon theology my entire life. Of course I had experienced a few doubts from time to time, but nothing on this level. On the contrary, I had been a stalwart in the faith, a loyal advocate eager to take up the apologist's cause. I carried that fervent belief and religious excitement with me as I served a mission to Brazil, where I had preached my faith with passion, urgency, and, above all, heartfelt conviction. To think that my efforts and belief might have been misguided struck me with a pain greater than I had ever before felt. I had never lost a loved one, but I had observed the bereaved. I had marveled at the depth of their mourning, a pain I was never able to fully understand. But now I understood. That dark night I mourned. I mourned what I thought was the death of my faith.

Seven years have passed since that difficult night. During this time, I have spent countless hours rethinking my positions about God, faith, reason, religion, and, most importantly, how my views on these issues impact not only my

life, but also the lives of my family and closest friends. It has been hard work, perhaps the heaviest lifting I have ever done. But it could not be any other way. Religious contemplation raises high-stakes questions, and it would be irresponsible, even reckless, to give them anything but the most careful consideration.

This article is part of my effort to contemplate these questions. The bulk of its content comes from a paper I wrote in 2007 during my last year as a graduate student at the Harvard Divinity School. I was on the tail end of an intense crisis of faith at the time, and I suspected I could benefit from associating with Mormons who had passed through the crucible and chosen to remain faithful. So I decided to write a paper based on oral interviews with a group of six well-educated Mormons, each of whom chose to remain faithful even after passing through experiences that deeply challenged their faith and commitment to the Church. I specifically wanted to know their answers to one very complicated question: *How did they navigate their way through the cloudy waters of religious doubt to not only remain committed to the faith, but become even more committed?*

Interesting things happened to me as I spoke with these thoughtful, dedicated Mormons. To my delight, I discovered that most of them had struggled with challenges similar to my own, but had found a way, through hard work, to keep their intellectual integrity *and* remain faithful and committed to the Church. This was exactly what I had been looking for: different perspectives on how I could reinterpret my faith in the face of my changing worldview. This article will share the perspectives of these wonderful people. It allows you to hear, in their own words, how they tried (and still try) to strike the right balance between faith and reason.

My analysis of these interviews is textured with insights from my personal crisis of faith. I will briefly describe that experience and explain the important role the interview participants played in helping me deal with it more effectively. I



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will also briefly discuss the crisis of faith experience in terms of its relationship to theories of faith development and transformative experience.¹ Through it all, I hope to advance the idea that a crisis of faith experience is not a demon to be quickly and forcibly exorcised, but is rather a painful yet necessary step in the evolution of one's faith.

attend the Mormon Church. Each was baptized Mormon at age eight.² At the time of the interviews, all six described themselves as fully active in church activities and deeply committed to the Mormon faith. When choosing this interview group, I selected for the following traits: (1) committed membership in the Mormon Church, (2) high edu-



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THE INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

THE SIX INTERVIEW participants cover a broad range of ages, from 27–86. All are Caucasian except one who is Asian-American. All were born and raised in the United States; five in the western United States and one in the northeastern United States. Four have earned doctorate degrees. One is progressing toward a doctorate degree. The other was progressing toward a master's degree at the time of the interviews and has since completed her degree. Each was raised by devout Mormon parents or by parents who strongly encouraged him or her to

cational level, and (3) at least one significant crisis of faith experienced as a Mormon.

This interview group is not large enough to produce the type of reliable patterns necessary for drawing well-supported conclusions about the broad contours and nuances of the crisis of faith experience. Still, as you will see, several important themes emerge throughout the interviews that appear to hint at the existence of reliable patterns.³ I will discuss each of these themes in this article. Some themes might be better described as stages or phases, but to keep things simpler, I will use the term “theme,” which seems more appropriate for the small size of my interview group.

THE INTERVIEWS

What Is a Crisis of Faith?

WHEN ASKED TO give his definition of a crisis of faith, John,⁴ a doctoral student in his thirties, said that it meant deciding whether one wants to continue being part of the Church. Similarly, Sasha, a master's student in her mid-twenties, implied that a crisis situation involves at least a consideration of separating from the Church. Tom, a fifty-something consultant, said the only option he would have considered had his crisis not been resolved was leaving the Church. Michael, a retired scientist in his eighties, expressed the same line of reasoning, saying that if he had been unable to resolve the dissonance, he would have looked elsewhere. Mark, an educator in his fifties, also believed that a crisis of faith meant to consider leaving the Church. However, he was the only participant to state that his crisis did not involve questioning the existence of God, but only the Mormon "packaging" of God.⁵ Helen, a self-described "DNA Mormon," shared a markedly different view from the others. An educator in her sixties, she dismissed the idea that a crisis of faith could be an event historically locatable in time. In her understanding, a crisis of faith is an *ongoing* phenomenon, experienced continually by all who believe in the supernatural.

Theme 1: Precipitating Events

ONE OF THE first questions I asked each participant was to recall any event or group of events that precipitated their crisis of faith. In most interviews, it seemed that certain events did in fact cause the crisis. However, other participants stated that they could not identify any one precipitating event. Thus, it is important to be careful about inferring causality and to instead focus on *how* the participant chose to answer this question.

John described three distinct crisis of faith experiences. The first came when he was a teenager. For no particular reason, he began to ask himself if he was committed to living the Mormon moral code. "Do I really want to do this? Does it make sense? Are these directives good for me?" He ultimately decided that these moral imperatives were good for him, and he later chose to serve as a missionary for the Church. His second precipitating experience came as an upperclassman in college, where his religion courses prompted him to look harder at his Mormon faith. "I knew I would be studying material that would contradict Mormon orthodoxy," he said, "So to better prepare myself, I decided to quickly rip off the band-aid." He did this by reading Fawn Brodie's controversial biography of Joseph Smith and two books employing historical critical methodology, one about Moses and the other on the historical Jesus. After reading this material, he said he felt "lonely in the Church" because he did not believe most Mormons understand the challenges these materials pose to orthodox interpretations of

Mormonism. John's third precipitating experience is an ongoing one in which he feels uncomfortable with the positions the Church takes on certain social issues. He implied that his continuing commitment to the Church might be contingent in part on whether these positions change.

Mark explained that his crisis of faith experience began as an undergraduate, after he had returned from his mission. He described an incident in which a long-time family acquaintance threatened to kill his father. This event led Mark to believe that he knew very little about how the real world worked. Subsequent correspondence with a friend about the intellectual underpinnings of Mormonism left him in a state of confusion in which he decided that the Mormon faith did not hold together from an intellectual standpoint. While stating that his concerns did not necessarily have anything to do with Mormon theology or history, Mark said that he decided to leave the Church.

Michael experienced his crisis of faith soon after graduating from college. He had been called as a ward missionary. Because he was nearing the point where he might be serving a mission, his local church leaders felt this calling would be good preparation. But when Michael accompanied the missionaries on their visits, he found he had difficulty expressing his belief in certain Mormon truth claims. He said he could not say for sure that he knew those things were true. This led him into a phase where he began to wonder if he had any religious convictions at all.

Sasha described her crisis of faith experience as beginning the day she took out her temple endowments in preparation for her mission. She said she was "disturbed" at first by what she saw at the temple. She found the clothing "strange" and was "shocked" by the ritualistic nature of the ceremony. She did not recognize it as her church. She said that she could not feel the Spirit of God at all. After that disappointing experience, she entered a period of despondency and doubt. Her doubts became serious enough that she considered not following through on her decision to serve a mission, for which her departure date was only two months away.

Tom was unable to pinpoint precisely what precipitated his crisis of faith experience. However, he suspects it was related to the dissonance he felt from living one area of his life contrary to Church teachings. In this state of dissonance, which he described as a "spiritually negative state," he felt confused and devoid of the Spirit of God. He said he was "self-absorbed" during this time and that this self-absorption led to a lack of spirituality, which in turn resurrected old doubts. Furthermore, he explained that in such a state, his doubts seemed to be "magnified."

Of all the participants, Helen was the only one who did not identify a single precipitating event or set of events as being at least partially responsible for her crisis of faith. This is likely due to her understanding, unique among interview participants, that a crisis of faith is an ongoing experience for all those who believe in the supernatural. She explained that this view probably derived from being raised in a Mormon home that constantly encouraged questioning of

conservative theological, historical, and political interpretations.

Theme 2: Doubts

ALL PARTICIPANTS EXCEPT Mark said that their crisis experiences involved doubting or questioning uniquely Mormon theological, historical, or cultural elements. Tom, for instance, felt uncomfortable with the practice of polygamy in the early Church. He specifically mentioned his confusion as to why Joseph Smith would “go after other men’s wives.” In addition, someone gave him a tract about Mormon polytheism, which confused him since he had always understood that Mormons were monotheists. Finally, he wondered about the validity of the Word of Wisdom. Under the weight of all these questions, Tom asked himself if he wanted to continue being part of this “strange” group, one that believed so differently from the rest of the world.

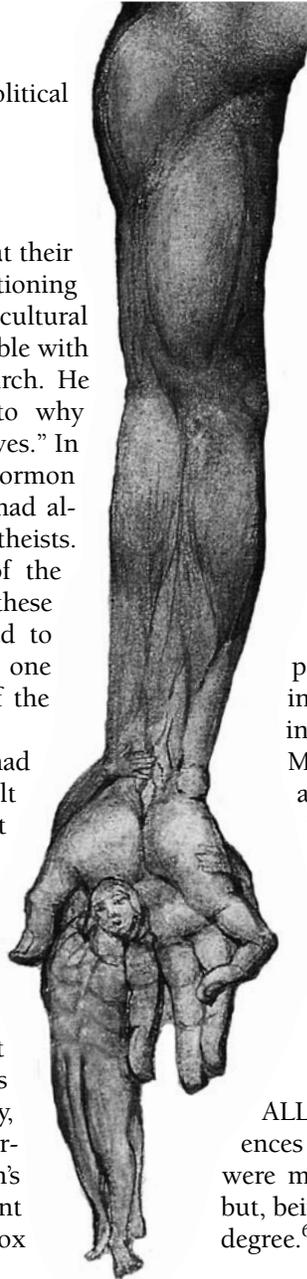
As mentioned previously, Sasha’s doubts had their beginnings in the discomfort she felt when she attended the temple for the first time. Her line of reasoning led her to believe that if the temple ceremony was not inspired, then everything else about the Church could be wrong too, and she wondered if she could remain a part of it.

John’s second crisis revolved primarily around theological concerns. He implied that one of his concerns during that period was the historicity of scripture. More specifically, he wondered when scripture ought to be interpreted symbolically rather than literally. John’s historical-critical studies of the New Testament exposed him to tensions between orthodox

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Mormon interpretations of the Bible and those of acclaimed biblical scholars, the latter of which seemed more appealing to him at times. John’s third crisis, an ongoing concern, is his discomfort with current Church policies and theological interpretations that in his opinion unjustly marginalize women and homosexuals.

Helen shares some of John’s concerns about the treatment of women in the Church. She believes that Mormon women sometimes feel inferior as a direct result of Church policies and cultural attitudes that tend to define a woman’s role



rather narrowly. She cited the all-male priesthood as one reason this occurs, explaining that since males occupy all major positions of authority, women can feel disenfranchised. For example, she said, the Relief Society once had complete control over its own budget and administrative decisions, but its ability to exercise that power was later taken away and placed under the supervision of the male leadership. In addition, she noted that because women do not hold the priesthood, they can feel in some instances that they must rely on men for a connection to God. She expressed her dismay at a woman in her ward who frequently laments “not having the priesthood in her home,” as if not having a priesthood-holding male in her life might actually prevent her from experiencing the fullness of God’s blessings.

Michael said that his crisis experience was compounded by certain popular Mormon cultural sayings, including one often heard at monthly testimony meetings: “I know the Church is true. I know the Book of Mormon is the word of God. I know Joseph Smith was a Prophet.” Michael said that the usage of this phrase “I know” bothered him, because he did not feel it was possible to really know these things, at least not in the modern understanding of the phrase. This was a particularly sensitive issue with him at the time because he felt a lot of pressure to express a similar conviction but did not have it.

Theme 3: Resolving the Crisis

ALL PARTICIPANTS SAID their crisis of faith experiences created varying degrees of internal dissonance. Some were more comfortable with this dissonance than others; but, being human, they all felt the need to resolve it to some degree.⁶ While the broad theme here is on resolving the crisis, it is helpful to describe it in terms of six sub-themes that naturally manifested themselves during the course of the interviews. These sub-themes are: “Aha!” Moments, Assumptions, Relationships, Spiritual Witnesses, Choices to Commit, and Personal Reflections.

“Aha!” Moments. In resolving their crisis of faith conflicts, three participants had what might best be described as an “Aha!” moment—a specific moment in time when a burst of inspiration entered their minds, suddenly helping them to make better sense of their conflicts. Mark’s “Aha!” moment took place the Sunday he decided he was attending church for the last time. When the last meeting finished and he got up to leave the building, presumably never to return, his home teacher stopped and asked if there was anything he could do to help him. Mark did not know what to say but deeply felt the sincere love his home teacher had

for him. However, he felt he had made his decision, so he continued toward the exit, only to be stopped again, this time by a woman he had served as a home teacher, who said, “Have you forgotten me?” As he pondered this turn of events, he began to wonder if God was trying to tell him something, and if leaving the Church might not be a wise decision. If he gave it up, he thought, he would be missing out on the opportunity, first, “to love someone” and, second, for “someone to love” him. He realized that love should be at the core of human life, and that the Mormon Church provided numerous opportunities for giving and receiving genuine love. After pondering this insight further, Mark resolved to put his intellectual doubts to rest and commit to a Mormon life.

Sasha told a touching story about a powerful “Aha!” moment of her own. One day she was at her parents’ house crying, pondering the implications of leaving her faith behind. She had left her bedroom and gone to do laundry in another room. While she waited for the laundry to finish, her mother came into the room and softly closed the door. Though Sasha had not yet said anything about her struggles, her mother seemed to sense something was wrong. She told Sasha that she loved her unconditionally and that she would support whatever decision was made. She then told Sasha that she wanted her to know that she deeply believed the principles taught in the Church and that she was firmly committed to it. This experience had a profound effect on Sasha. She said that her mother’s expression of love, together with her expression of commitment to the Mormon faith, calmed her fears significantly. She reasoned that if her mother could be so confident in her faith, then perhaps she could address her doubts in a way that would allow her to remain confidently in the Church.

Michael experienced his “Aha!” moment when he came across John 8:32, which reads: “And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” At that moment, Michael said, he realized that God “would never ask [him] to believe in anything that wasn’t true.” This insight liberated him, allowing him the freedom to accept everything within the Church that he found to be good and true, while also allowing him to give less credence to those things which did not resonate with him.

Assumptions. Closely related to “Aha!” moments are the set of assumptions that each participant developed before, during, and after his or her crisis of faith experience. I use the term “assumption” in its classic logical sense, as in evidence \Rightarrow assumption \Rightarrow conclusion. So in the context of this article, an assumption is the evidence-based interpretative mechanism that a person uses to arrive at a conclusion.

Helen stated that it was easier to deal with spiritual dissonance if she jettisoned the either/or assumption common in Mormon culture (i.e., *either* everything about the Church is true *or* the Church is not true at all). The either/or thinking can be dangerous, she said, because it does not allow for a more nuanced acceptance or rejection of various theolog-



Without exception, every participant credited at least one person with helping him or her get through these struggles: a family member, friend, teacher, Church leader, or writer.

ical, historical, or cultural interpretations. In Helen’s view, the most important thing is to embrace the “core of the gospel,” which she described as “faith in God, service to others, and faith in humanity.” Helen also embraces the assumption that the Church is a work in progress and that there is hope for improvement. This view, she said, helps her feel that she can have a voice in that improvement. “I love the Church,” she said, “and because I love the Church, I feel obligated to point out problems so that we can find solutions and make the Church better. I am willing to be patient.”

Like Helen, John is concerned with the status of women in the Church, but he also believes that the Church should be doing more to help homosexuals. He feels that current Church policy toward homosexuals could be modified to produce better outcomes. However, he shares Helen’s as-

sumption that things could very well improve down the road. He believes that every Church member has a role in “making Mormonism” and that the Church will look much different several years down the road from what it does now. John even used Helen’s same phraseology, saying that he is “willing to be patient” until desired changes come.

John described two other assumptions that have helped him get through his spiritual crises. First, he learned to not assume that scriptural narratives need be historical in order for him to accept them as normative. In other words, even if he is unsure of the historicity of certain narratives, he can still find deep meaning in them and thus accept them as an essential part of his faith. Second, he chooses not to see himself as a fixed entity. Especially at his relatively young age, he believes he does not have enough knowledge or experience to make a decision as critical as leaving the Church. “Let’s see how the Church looks in thirty years before I make any rash decisions,” he said.

Similarly, Tom has decided that it is dangerous to give up on his faith and other commitments unless he knows for certain that the alternative really will be better. In his view, the grass is not always greener on the other side. In fact, during the interview, Tom expressed strong caution about giving up on one’s religious commitments. “Be careful what you’re trading things in for,” he said. “The Spirit of God is an animator that gives us light. Would you really want to trade that for something less?”

Sasha takes a long-term view, believing she has eternity to figure out all the answers. This view, she said, helps her focus on enjoying the answers she does have while patiently waiting for those she does not.

Michael said that as he has gotten older, he has become more understanding of some aspects of Mormon culture that used to trouble him. For instance, he is no longer as bothered by the familiar “I know” phraseology uttered so often from Mormon pulpits. He now sees this unusual language as an acceptable way for people to express their feelings about those things they believe to be good, right, and true.

Relationships. An important factor, if not *the* most important factor, that helped participants successfully navigate their crisis experiences was the help they received from other people, particularly family, friends, teachers, church leaders, and writers. Each interviewee explicitly acknowledged this assistance. For Mark, the help came from his home teacher and the woman he had served as home teacher. For Sasha, it was her mother’s loving support and a church leader who helped her take the long view. For Tom, it was his wife, who lovingly helped him work through his problems, and a wise local church leader who assigned him a responsible ecclesiastical duty that kept him close to the Church. For Helen, it was her institute of religion teachers and her family and friends who demonstrated that one can remain faithful even while questioning some elements of Mormon orthodoxy. For Michael, it was the inspiration he drew from biblical authors. For John, it was the Mormon intellectual community

he encountered in college, a Mormon scholar who served as his mentor, and faithful Mormon apologists whose writings he described as a “gateway drug” that introduced him to a world of sophisticated Mormon thinkers.

Spiritual Witnesses. Some participants said that their personal relationships with God were partly responsible for helping them overcome their crisis experiences. Sasha, for instance, said that her initial discomfort with the temple ceremony gradually subsided as she returned to the temple regularly and received many spiritual confirmations there that helped her recommit to the Church. Tom likewise credited divine influence with his decision to remain committed to the faith. He spoke of the need to be true to one’s “conscience” or one’s “inner voice.” Tom said that, for him, it finally came down to his decision to follow that voice. He also said that in his darkest hours, he was greatly helped by the memory of *past* experiences in which he had received spiritual confirmations of truth. This prompted him to say that “the Spirit of God is the only reliable guide we have. Logic as we know it won’t get us there.” Helen also spoke of God’s influence in helping her remain committed to the faith. “Mormonism is a religion that encourages us to be truth seekers,” she said. “We are supposed to study things out in our minds and ask God for a spiritual confirmation of our decisions.” After describing some of her frustrations about the way the Church operates, she said that it was all far less significant than the spiritual nourishment available at church. “You feel the Spirit of God,” she said, “so you keep going back.”

Choices to Commit. For several participants, resolving their crises of faith involved a practical “choice,” as many of them called it. Sasha, for example, emphasized that one ultimately has to “choose” to make a commitment to the Church. She stressed that this commitment ought to be based on a witness from the Spirit of God, but that a major part of it is a “practical commitment.” “We can’t just focus on what feels right all the time,” she said, “Otherwise we might be embracing a new worldview every other week.” Tom shared a similar view. Likening religious commitment to marriage, he said that it requires an emotional component, but that it is also a “choice.” Finally, Helen stated that she has “decided” to make her faith work for her because she is committed to it. “But I’ve had to recommit myself over and over,” she said. Helen was raised to believe it is not a good idea to be a fence sitter and that a firm commitment is important. She said her family often quoted Revelation 3:16: “So then because though art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.”

Mark described a poignant moment that did not play a role in helping him resolve the acute phase of his crisis of faith but was still deeply influential in helping him confirm his commitment to the Mormon faith. He said that as an undergraduate, he had attended a ward where one of the church leaders happened to be a leading anthropologist at

one of the world's elite universities. During one conversation, this scholar told Mark that during his professional life he had studied many cultures and religions, each of which had its own story to help explain the meaning of life. And then he looked Mark in the eye and said, "But our story, the Mormon story, is the one I choose to believe." This perspective led Mark to believe that it made good sense to base his religious commitments, at least in part, on a practical choice.

Personal Reflections. When I asked the participants to reflect on their crisis of faith experiences, two things were immediately apparent. First, it was obvious that each of them had taken the time to carefully process their experiences intellectually and spiritually, arriving at a point where they truly *owned* their faith. Second, and most importantly, it was clear that despite the difficulties, all of them were deeply grateful for their crisis experiences. Even though they struggled and continue to struggle with their faith at times, they believe these challenges have made them spiritually stronger people—even stronger than they were before the crisis experience. Tellingly, John said, "I've had many crisis of faith experiences, and I hope to have many more." He said that difficult experiences of this type force one to stretch and learn important truths that might otherwise remain hidden from view. Tom expressed a similar sentiment, saying that it is not desirable that one should never have to struggle spiritually, for if one never experiences a "negative spiritual state," one cannot grow. Moreover, he said, if one does not experience spiritual struggle, one cannot have empathy for those who do. "Jesus descended below all things so he could understand all things," he said. Sasha also said that spiritual struggle was necessary for developing a strong faith commitment. "You have to pay the price," she said, later adding that struggling with her faith turned out to be a generous gift, because it gave her the opportunity to "embrace it on [her] own terms." Helen likewise believes that questioning religious issues can ultimately be an enriching experience if one allows it: "Exploration and faith should go together," she said, "even if it makes things difficult."

MY THOUGHTS ON THE INTERVIEWS

WHAT STRUCK ME most forcefully from these interviews was the gratitude the participants expressed for their crisis of faith experiences. None disparaged the experience, nor did they express regret that it happened to them. Rather, they each described their crisis as an *evolution*, a difficult but critically important step in helping them develop a stronger, more mature faith. Thinking about the crisis of faith experience as an evolution is helpful, because it takes what is typically perceived as a negative experience and turns it on its head, emphasizing the many positive benefits a crisis can offer.

The crisis of faith experience as an evolution is a well-known concept among moral and cognitive development researchers. Developmental psychologist James Fowler's stage-

based model of faith development does an excellent job describing how faith can and does evolve. Fowler's model includes six distinct stages. For most participants in this study, it seemed clear that the onset of their crisis occurred during the transition from stage three to stage four. A person in stage-three faith, which Fowler calls synthetic-conventional faith, is described as being "aware of having values and normative images. He or she articulates them, defends them, and feels deep emotional investments in them, but typically has not [yet] made the value system, *as a system*, the object of reflection."⁷ In addition, stage three is characterized by a greater reliance on external authority rather than one's own critical thinking ability.

Stage-four faith, which Fowler calls individuative-reflexive faith, is characterized by two very different features: "the critical distancing from one's previous assumptive value system and the emergence of the executive ego" wherein authority is *relocated* within the individual.⁸ In stage four, the individual gives less credibility to the assumptions accepted and encouraged by others and more credibility to his or her privately-developed assumptions. Not surprisingly, four of the six interview participants (John, Mark, Sasha, and Michael), experienced their most serious crisis of faith experiences during or shortly after undergraduate or graduate school, a time of life when they were deeply embedded in educational environments that encouraged them to think critically and reexamine deeply held assumptions.

Fowler often cites philosopher George Santayana's famous fish metaphor: "We cannot know for certain who first discovered water," he said. "But we can be sure that it was not the fish."⁹ Extending the metaphor, Fowler compares the person in stage-three faith to a fish that has lived its entire life inside the same aquarium, never getting outside to see what life is like elsewhere. But if the fish were to somehow find its way out, it could look back at the aquarium that held it, examining it more objectively and realizing the limitations and other effects this setting had on its development. The point, of course, is that significant progress in the evolution of our faith is difficult, if not impossible, if we neglect to review and revise the assumptions formed during stage three.

Four of the interview participants were like this fish, comfortable in the aquarium until some internal or external force caused them to leap out and experience life from a different perspective. At first, they were very uncomfortable with this new perspective, but after a while they began to make sense of it, to the point where they can now leap back into the aquarium if they wish and swim contentedly, knowing full well that they are indeed back in the aquarium. The "Aha!" moments I have described in this article are a good example of the participants suddenly realizing how to accomplish this acrobatic act successfully.¹⁰

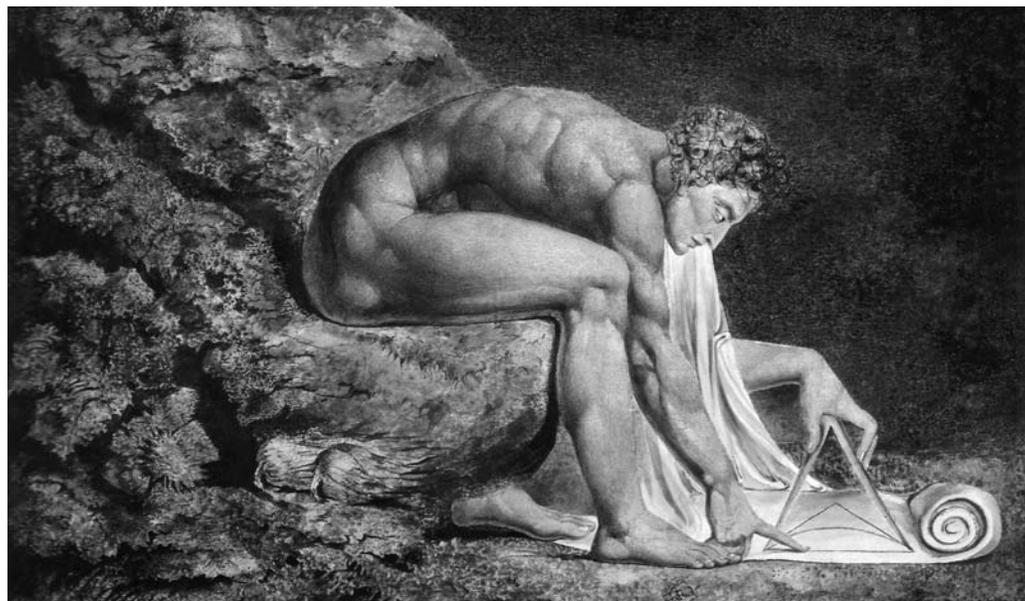
Fowler defines faith as our way of committing to "centers of value and power" that provide an *ordering* influence in our lives.¹¹ The interviews suggest that what caused participants the most pain during their crisis experiences was the

disorder they felt when they tried to make sense of new knowledge using old assumptions. It did not work. The assumptions were inadequate, poorly suited for the task, and destined to perpetuate the feeling of disorder. To make things work, to resolve the disorder, the participants had to adopt new assumptions—new ways of looking at things that brought a much-needed sense of order. These new assumptions replaced dissonance with consonance, allowing the participants to successfully reconcile new knowledge with old as they recommitted themselves to their faith and moved forward with a renewed sense of spiritual equilibrium.

It was fascinating to discover that the themes of the crisis experience I describe in this article seem to loosely follow

get through these struggles: a family member, friend, teacher, church leader, or writer. This fact suggests at least two things. First, struggling Mormons who do not have these relationships may be at greater risk for giving up on their faith. Second, it is highly likely that associating with others who have successfully navigated crisis experiences is necessary for helping people keep their faith and stay committed to the Church.

Based on these observations, I believe that our faith community could do more to facilitate relationships of this type for our good brothers and sisters who are undergoing crisis of faith experiences. Indeed almost all the people I know who have left the Church due to a crisis of faith have not had enough help from faithful mentors who could sincerely empathize with their struggles. Bishops, stake presidents, and other church leaders are ideal for this role if they are personally suited to it. However, if doubters perceive these leaders to be ill-equipped to resolve concerns of this sort, they may not be comfortable even raising the issue for fear of being misunderstood, chastised, or labeled (especially feared is the much misused “apostate” label).¹⁴ Indeed, I have heard some stake presidents and bishops quickly dismiss crisis experiences as an



the stages of transformative learning laid out by theologian James Loder. According to Loder, five distinct stages contribute to a major transformation in the way an individual perceives reality: (1) conflict (similar to the crisis of faith itself and resultant pain), (2) interlude for scanning (similar to a time for examining new assumptions in order to deal with the crisis of faith problem), (3) constructive act of imagination (similar to the “Aha!” moment or spiritual witness that confirms the validity of a particular assumption or group of assumptions),¹² (4) release (similar to replacing spiritual and intellectual dissonance with consonance), and (5) interpretation (similar to personal reflections that solidify meaning). I do not believe these similarities are coincidental. I thus give my enthusiastic support to Loder’s framework as an excellent tool for understanding the natural progression of a crisis of faith experience.¹³

One of the most intriguing insights to come from these interviews is the highly significant role that relationships played and continue to play in the resolution of crisis situations for these participants. Without exception, every participant credited at least one person with helping him or her

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obvious result of sin or by saying that the person just needs to read the scriptures more often, say better prayers, or have more faith. While I do not doubt that a lack of spiritual fortitude may have much to do with the crisis in some cases, I also know that many crisis situations are not so simple. In the more complicated cases, the concerns go far beyond a lack of spirituality. In these situations, doubters need more than counsel to live basic gospel principles. They need guidance from people who can help them reexamine their *approach* to Mormonism. They need mentoring from people who can help them explore new assumptions and reinterpret their faith accordingly. They need counsel from wise men and women who can show them how to keep their intellectual integrity *and* stay faithful to God and the Church.

In instances where church leaders do not feel they are personally suited to handling situations of this type, the solu-

tion may be as simple as identifying wise, mature individuals who have successfully navigated crisis situations and asking those individuals to serve as informal mentors to those struggling with their faith. In my opinion, the more informal the relationship is, the better. Otherwise the doubter may end up feeling like a charity case or may view the mentor with suspicion as a representative of church leadership. Making it an informal affair also eases the mind of the mentor, who will feel less pressure to say and do certain things and will be more inclined to offer inspired counsel. Of course this approach endorses the hope that faithful mentors will recognize the problem independently and approach the doubter privately, without being asked by a church leader. Most successful mentor relationships I have observed or participated in myself have developed in this manner.¹⁵

I have no doubt that helping those in crisis situations establish strong relationships with empathetic mentors would significantly reduce the number of our beloved brothers and sisters who leave the Church every year. This is a very serious matter. This is about the worth of a soul. It is about taking care of our own and keeping them close to our family. It is about allowing them to bless our faith community with their presence and talents. It is about helping them become stronger individuals and anchored mothers and fathers who have the spiritual strength to lead their children in righteousness. It is our duty and privilege to rally around these good people, to strengthen their spirits, calm their concerns, and assure them that we love them and want them to stay with us.

COMING TO TERMS WITH MY PERSONAL CRISIS OF FAITH

THE STORIES OF the interview participants resonated strongly with my personal crisis of faith experience. The most important lesson I learned from these outstanding people is that my crisis of faith could be a blessing in disguise—a grueling experience to be sure, but one that could ultimately help my faith evolve into something much stronger if I let it. Such a view caught me off guard in some respects because it was difficult, especially during my darkest hours, to see how my crisis could possibly be a positive thing. During those tumultuous years, my feelings were dominated by fear: fear that I was risking the loss of something precious; fear that I might become rudderless in the raging sea of life. I suppose I saw my crisis in terms of how it could *hurt me* rather than *help me*. It was not until my crisis began to settle down, and until I was able to carefully process the thoughts of these interview participants, that I began to see just how important my crisis could be in helping my faith evolve into something deeper and more meaningful than it was before.¹⁶

A critical factor in the evolution of my faith is the new assumptions I have adopted, some of which I developed on my own and some of which I borrowed from others, including the interview participants. Thankfully, these assumptions

help me view my faith through wider, more powerful lenses, allowing me to see that there are *many* ways to make Mormonism work for me.¹⁷ That I have benefitted so much from the people who helped me develop my new assumptions is yet further evidence that relationships with faithful, empathetic mentors are crucial.

Looking back on the acute phase of my crisis experience, I realize that my faith never really died. Rather, like many of the interview participants, I had unknowingly reached a critical transition point in the faith-development spectrum: the end of stage three and the beginning of stage four. At that point, I could have chosen to go either way. But I chose to stay in the Church. It was a conscious decision, a practical choice that ultimately seemed right to me. It resulted from my desire to make things work. I did not want to let go of the many beautiful elements of my Mormon faith. Nor did I want to explain away the many spiritual confirmations of truth I had received over the years. I was sure (and still am) that I would be happier with the Church in my life.

I now view my relationship with the Church similar to the way I see my relationship with my family and close friends. I love these wonderful people. I know them intimately. I am well acquainted with their amazing attributes. I am also well acquainted with their deficiencies and strange quirks. And yet my love for them remains strong. In fact, it grows even stronger as I mature and am better able to appreciate the power of their positive attributes on an even deeper level. And so I wonder why I instinctively want to hold the Church to a dramatically higher standard than I hold my family and dearest friends. If I am honest with myself, I have to admit that such an approach is not very fair. Sure, the Church may not be doing every single thing right, but it is doing so much that is right. I have been a beneficiary of those right things. In moments of quiet introspection, I am often overcome with gratitude for the many beautiful gifts the Church selflessly gives me.

I love my faith. I honor my Church. I treasure my faith community. All have helped me to become a better person. I am deeply grateful for the unique opportunity my crisis of faith has given me to understand each of these better. It has been a difficult but rewarding journey of self-discovery, a journey of searching for, and finding, evidence of God's love for me and for all people.

Unlike John, I would never hope for another crisis of faith, at least not one as far-reaching and painful as my first. But if life ever does see fit to lay that burden on my shoulders again, I will not shrug it off fearfully but rather will bear it with gratitude and foresight, knowing from cherished memory that if I am willing to endure it patiently—with hope as my partner—that my shoulders will strengthen and my faith will shine brighter than ever before.

NOTES

1. During my research for this project, I was saddened to discover that the crisis of faith is a severely under-studied human experience, particularly as it

relates to Mormon life. In my opinion, the crisis of faith experience is common enough and significant enough that it ought to receive at least a modicum of the attention we typically give to other powerful human experiences like birth, death, illness, religious conversion, or romantic love. Further studies probing the crisis of faith experience within the context of broadly examined moral and cognitive development theories would help us better understand this unique and deeply emotional experience, including how it compares to other important human experiences that researchers have explored in greater detail.

2. I was struck by the fact that every interview participant was baptized Mormon at age eight and was raised by faithful Mormon parents or by parents who strongly supported his or her involvement with the Church. I did not intentionally select for this trait. However as I considered the decision-making tendencies of the participants, I could not help but wonder if the deep Mormon roots shared by all of them had something to do with their choice to remain committed to the Church. Of course, this may not be a safe conclusion to draw from this small interview group. But it is possible that the more exposure one has to a certain religious orientation, the more likely one will be to hold on to that orientation when things get difficult. This raises the question of whether converts to the Church are more likely to leave the Church when a crisis of faith situation arises. This question can only be answered authoritatively by conducting additional studies. Personally, I have known many converts with deeper religious commitments than those of people who have been practicing Mormons their entire lives. However, I can also understand why one who was previously comfortable in a non-Mormon environment might naturally want to retreat back to that familiar environment as a way to resolve the dissonance brought about by a crisis of faith.

3. My hope is that the themes and sub-themes I identify and explore in this article can serve as a foundation for more extensive studies that probe the crisis of faith experience on a much deeper level and produce reliable patterns.

4. To preserve their privacy, I have disguised the real names of all interview participants.

5. Indeed, Mark was the only participant to emphasize that he has never doubted the existence of God, and the only one to mention the question of God's reality as central to his experience. as central to his crisis experience. It could easily be that the nature of God was critical for other participants too. But I unfortunately neglected to raise this issue as part of my interview questions. It would be interesting to know if others in the study drew a clear line of demarcation between leaving the Church and abandoning belief in God altogether.

6. I use the terms "resolve" and "resolution" throughout this article in a limited sense, acknowledging, as Helen does, that a crisis of faith may be an ongoing concern but recognizing that some crisis situations are so serious that they must resolve to a sufficient degree if an individual is to have any hope of maintaining belief in the supernatural, committing to a religious system, and achieving some sense of spiritual equilibrium.

7. James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1981), 162.

8. *Ibid.*, 179.

9. *Ibid.*, 161.

10. Indeed, the interviews make it clear that some people are more willing than others to engage in the type of intellectual gymnastics required to believe in the supernatural and in the specific theological interpretations unique to orthodox Mormonism. I imagine the reasons for this are diverse and intriguing. It is outside the scope of this article to explore them, but I hope that someone will eventually do so.

11. Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 4.

12. The spiritual witnesses received by the interview participants went beyond logic to give deeper meaning to their quests, something that Loder describes as necessary for producing a truly "convicting experience" James E. Loder, *The Transforming Moment* (Colorado Springs, CO: Howard and Helmers, 1989), 12.

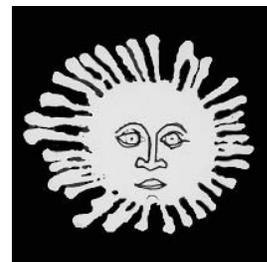
13. *Ibid.*, 40. I should note that the participants could have exactly followed each of the five stages and chosen not to remain committed Mormons. They could have become committed atheists, agnostics, or adherents of another faith. The critical difference is the type of new assumptions they adopted in stage four, which highlights how vital it is that individuals in stage four are surrounded by people and reading material that help them become more aware of their intellectual and spiritual options.

14. Such labels or chastisements seem misguided in many cases because, at least in my experience, a high percentage of those who pass through a crisis of faith experience do not cross that lonely land because they are against the Church, but because they deeply love the Church.

15. Of course the doubter must consent to working with a mentor. In highly sensitive situations like this, it is doubly important to respect free agency. I should emphasize that providing empathetic mentors, be they church leaders or informal mentors, is just one possibility among many for how we might more effectively address crises of faith in our community. Another idea is to provide doubters with a guide of faith-promoting resources that deal candidly with the crisis experience as it relates to uniquely Mormon concerns and to matters of faith and religion generally. Good resources already exist for this, and we could easily develop more.

16. Sadly, my personal crisis of faith experience and my discussions with the interview group led me to believe that people trained to think critically are naturally prone to look for the bad while too often ignoring the good. When it comes to faith, religion, and God, we are often quick to dismiss their validity because we cannot verify them using traditional scientific methods—this even when the powerful meaning and sustaining influence they bring to our lives is plain to see. Yet critical thinking does not have to be this way. There is no reason that fault-finding need always be the end goal. I blame the misuse of critical thinking on the way it is taught in our universities and colleges. We are taught to nitpick. But we do not hear often enough that we can nitpick without always picking the nit.

17. Some might contend that this talk of new assumptions is just a thinly veiled justification for employing the oft-criticized "cafeteria" approach to religion, the one where you pick and choose what you will believe. But I would argue that there is a big difference between the person who carefully and prayerfully considers what to believe and the person who lazily and without divine guidance chooses to believe some religious tenets while disregarding others.



POLAR ALIGNMENT

It might have been that many days passed—ere it swept so closely over me as to fan me with its acrid breath.

—Edgar Allan Poe
The Pit and the Pendulum

Sometimes you can hear the voices inside Polaris (before the enclosure of dusk), whispering from the skeletons revived from all their past days. There's an image of us, an expectation, hanging in the ancient light of white bone, a swinging hiss like Poe's razor-sharp pendulum, marking its descent through our bodies strapped to the earth's shadow,

its simple particles of sand and clay. And the drug that fills our lives is so strong we don't know if our conscience has slept on the edge of Hell's stoney precipice, or if it orbits like a soul one arc-minute away, fanning our dying lives with its breath.

—BARRY BALLARD