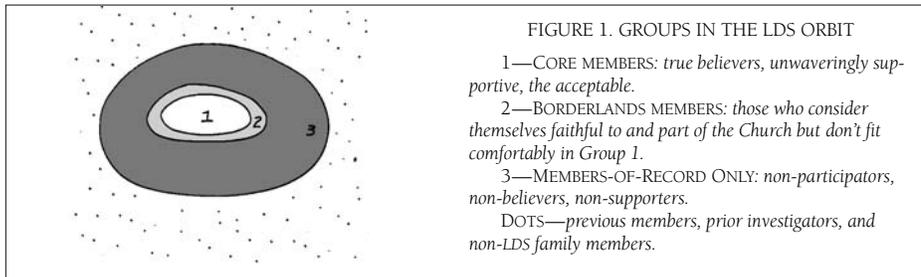


BRAVING THE BORDERLANDS . . .

RECONNECTING WITH
A FORMER FAITH?

by D. Jeff Burton



OVER RECENT WEEKS, I have exchanged the following edited emails with “Katherine” (not her real name). After her story, I’ve included an update from Jared, one of our previous Borderlands story tellers.

KATHERINE, PART I

KATHERINE: I definitely consider myself a Borderlander. I joined the Mormon Church fourteen years ago after nearly three years of investigation. I was born and raised a good active Catholic and had quite a difficult time leaving that church. During a service mission as a teenage camp counselor with her Missionaries of Charity in the Bronx, I even met Mother Teresa.

But in college, I fell in love with a wonderful Mormon true-believer, Edward [not his real name], and that provided the motivation for me to keep venturing into the uncomfortable. After a considerable struggle, I felt I was being led by God towards LDS baptism. About this time, I wrote to Mother Teresa about something and she responded, “Let us all welcome Jesus into our lives in whatever form and whenever He wants to come . . .” Her message made it easier for me, and I felt the Lord was directing me. But, on the other hand, to this day, I can hardly talk about my baptism with my family—they were so upset. The difficulties started right after my baptism and included an LDS woman telling me that Edward deserved a life-long member for his wife (her, I suppose?). Then I was

denied my patriarchal blessing recommend because I could not say that I knew the Book of Mormon was “true.” (I may be the only person who ever failed her first patriarchal blessing interview.)

Now, fourteen years, a Mormon husband, and three Mormon children later, I am a suburban, stay-at-home mother. Edward and I are active temple recommend holders. I quilt. I cook dinner nearly every night. I volunteer at my children’s school. (I will even admit, I have scrapbooked—let’s keep that quiet, though!) My life looks so conservative, sometimes I hardly even recognize myself. Despite outer appearances, I am a liberal who envisions a day when women can receive the priesthood, wants to see Christianity take the lead in saving this precious planet we profess our God created, and longs for a church anxiously engaged in seeing that there are no more poor among us.

However, I am filled with doubts and questions about my decision to join the Church. I no longer seem to be able to simply push them aside and press on. I now wonder if I wasn’t wrong to have taken this giant leap of faith. I have begun to long for the impossible comfort of the faith of my youth. (My family is Catholic back to Peter, but Edward’s family is Mormon back to Joseph.)

I am also the Young Women’s president in our ward. Though the time I spend serving in my calling is about the only time I feel relief from the constant and oppressive pain, I am still wracked with guilt. Our

bishop is a rather simple and judgmental fellow. I have struggled with whether to be honest with him about my doubts. My husband and close friends all feel if I were to be honest, I would immediately be released from my calling. Complicating matters, my 11-year-old daughter is excited to be welcomed into the YW program in a few short months, with her mother as president.

While being supportive, my husband feels as if I have given up, that I am refusing to see the good in the Church. In tears yesterday, I told him I just don’t know if I can go back to church. He told me he thinks I’m not trying anymore. He said it seems like I’ve made my decision and I won’t hear of anything else. I asked what he thinks I should be doing that I’m not. He said he didn’t know. It’s been fourteen years of my hanging on by a thread, and I am tired. I just desperately want to go to a church on a Sunday and leave feeling nourished, not wiped out. Is it wrong to ask for that?

JEFF: Yours is a sad but not unusual experience for some converts. A few things came to mind as I read your story:

- You have spent fourteen years in commitment to your husband, your children, the Church, and your current lifestyle. You can probably take a few more months (or even years) to decide what to do. Don’t make any hurried decisions.

- As your husband says, there is a lot of good in being involved in the Church. Try to concentrate for the moment on those “good things.”

- You’re not a true believer, but that’s okay. You might reconcile with yourself that you simply don’t believe everything Mormon, and probably never will, short of having a divine revelation. But only a small minority of baptized Mormons worldwide believe everything, although those who remain active generally keep their doubts to themselves. Perhaps at some future point (maybe after your daughter is over the excitement of YW), you could begin the process of “coming out.” It is possible to be an active, “faithful” member of the Church and acknowledge that you’re not a true believer. Yes, some will treat you differently, but some will treat you better. You may not have the leadership positions, but that puts you in a good place to do more hands-on service like you once did with Mother Teresa’s order. You can choose to do more things that are simply “good,” those things Edward was referring to. And you will have that sense of freedom that comes with honesty and openness. But there is no hurry.

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KATHERINE: I have actually been talking with a Catholic priest friend and others for more than six months now. It really isn't my style to make rash decisions. But I must admit that I have been feeling a bit overwhelmed lately, and the reminder to breathe deeply and be mindful of the bigger picture is helpful. And, yes, there is much good in the Mormon Church. I love the people too much to not see that.

I was startled by your statement about my not being a "true believer." That makes me sad. Am I really destined to a life in a church where I don't believe many of its basic claims? It seems like there ought to be something more satisfying than that. Could I be a true believer somewhere else, or is that just the sad reality for those of us who wonder?

I just fear that if I allow this to go on too long, I will end up growing even more resentful than I am now. I am in a book group with a bunch of LDS women, all dear friends. One night after the book discussion, the topic moved to the Church. I didn't think I was being all that critical, but one of my closest friends got very defensive of the Church, and I found myself growing angry with her. My reaction was very uncharacteristic, and I left that night thinking that I needed to not let this happen again. I don't want to end up feeling like a caged animal by staying in this Church. That's why I have allowed myself a little more freedom to ask questions and wonder about the future. This approach has been helpful. It seems to be allowing me to let go of some of the anger. But it has been a long time.

JEFF: Your approach to your problems so far looks thoughtful. Yes, it may be troublesome for a long time. But you will eventually have peace and understanding.

Over the years, I have been struck by three statements: "The Church is true from the ward down." "All religion is local." "Our world is our family and our ward." I take these to mean that the various personal religions of all the good people in our wards are "true," and that we as individuals can't save the entire world but we can "save" our families and friends, or whatever that world is that God has placed us in.

KATHERINE: I hear what you are saying about the good people at church. I recently read the SUNSTONE article, "Mapping Book of Mormon Historicity Debates: Perspectives from the Sociology of Knowledge," by John-Charles Duffy. One of the more striking sentences was, "You will tend to

believe what the people closest to you believe, and the more time you spend conversing with other people about their beliefs, the more plausible their beliefs will become to you."¹ I had been willing to accept *a lot* because of my social commitments to the ward (and I have received many rewards from these commitments), but now I am no longer comfortable with just serving the needs of the group—thus the crisis of faith. But why this is difficult for me to figure out is that my strongest ties—those to my husband and children—will bind me to the Church. What to do?

JEFF: One thought strikes me. When you married Edward, did you not at the same time marry Mormonism? Edward's ties to Mormonism since his youth are similar to the ties you feel to the faith of your youth, and similar to the ties your children are creating now to the Mormon Church. This issue needs to be dealt with in your decision-making process.

Another thought: could you (at least in your heart) be both Catholic and Mormon? Maybe choosing the best of both will work best for your family and marriage. I could see you, for example, telling your husband, children, and ward members, "I have roots in Catholicism, and my heart is there as well as with my family and friends in Mormonism. I don't mean that I'm rejecting Mormonism or any of you; I'm just trying to make my life fuller and happier." And to your family, "You don't have to participate with me unless you want to."

KATHERINE: Catholics and Mormons do have a lot in common. And in the areas where they differ, they really don't cause too much conflict. For instance, one can appreciate the saints of Catholicism or pray the Our Father without really coming into conflict with Mormonism. One time when I was feeling particularly glum about how much I missed the Ave Maria, I attended a meeting in the temple where a very talented musician played the Bach-Gounod "Prelude in C" (my favorite version of the Ave Maria). So, there can be overlap. And as painful as leaving Catholicism has been for me, I have felt the loving touch of the Savior reassuring me that all good things belong to Him. And that He is mindful of me and all that I love, even as a Mormon.

But it gets tricky where doctrines collide. Can I hold a temple recommend if I actually accept the doctrine of the Trinity? How can I really be Catholic if I reject the Eucharist? I suppose I could find a way to

juggle and not really commit totally to either religion, but I just don't know how to do it. And I don't know how ultimately satisfying it would be.

KATHERINE (about a week later): A new development! A few weeks ago, the husband of one of my counselors in the YW presidency was called to be a counselor to the stake president and now must sit on the stand, go to other wards, and so forth. They have four very young children (ages 2–8). I pulled her aside right after this happened to tell her it's OK if their family can't handle all this, and I could talk to the bishop about having her released. I didn't want her to feel as if I were forcing her out, but I wanted to make it as easy as possible for her to ask. She didn't respond one way or the other. She's just one of those who won't ask to be released. The next Sunday was awful for my counselor. After the third or fourth time she had to leave the chapel with an unruly child, I followed them into a classroom to find her in tears. I insisted she let me take her toddler. (Little did she know how relieved I was to have an excuse to leave the meeting and how my time with my little friend looking at pictures of Jesus hanging on the walls was far better for my soul than what was going on in the chapel.)

Shortly thereafter, I explained the situation to the bishop, suggesting that she might be released. He responded, "Well, I'll call her in my office and talk to her." I warned, "I'm not sure she will be able to be totally honest with you about how she's feeling." To which he told me, "Well, I'll talk to her, I have the power to discern these things."

The bishop didn't get back to me until I cornered him a few days ago and asked if he had discussed any of this with his counselors. He responded, "Yes, we hope to have it taken care of in a few weeks." So I asked, "Are you going to fill me in?" So then he reluctantly said, "You were right; your counselor is overwhelmed. So we are going to release all of you."

Wow! I was furious. I was thinking, "There goes my daughter's and my vision of our future together in YW. There goes my major source of relief and service." While I ranted to my husband, he said something that really upset me. My response absolutely startled both of us. In my anger, I spit out, "Well, the bishop is going to be surprised when I leave and take our children with me, because I sure as hell don't intend on leaving them behind!" Now, I usually am pretty good at self-editing. And

until that point, I hadn't really been thinking about my leaving in terms of pulling the children out as well. But as soon as I said it, I realized that I couldn't leave without in some way bringing my children with me. And I don't think my husband would be willing to let me pull them out of church.

When I blurted out that comment, he went silent. So I've been pretty much a mess since. The last thing I want to do is rip my family apart, but if I continue to pursue my doubts and unsettledness, I am not sure how to avoid it.

JEFF: My goodness, these are very troubling developments. My initial suggestions to you, in our first emails, not to make any hasty decisions about the Church and your role in it are even more important now.

Your family and your marriage are more important than the Church, your bishop, his insensitivity, and your frustrations with them. You don't want the Church and your current connections to it to damage the critical relationships with your family.

You might consider sitting down with your husband and telling him that he, your marriage, and your family come first, no matter what, and that you will not be making any big moves anytime soon because you don't want to surprise or damage anyone. If that calms him, perhaps he will be willing to spend two or three hours per week with you discussing the issues, where you might go from here, and how you could mutually work out some plans. Hopefully, he will be willing and able to work with you.

Many men and women have been through this. Some have simply decided to stay, keeping silent, but making the best of it. That is one extreme. The other is rushing off, arms flailing, screaming, but usually falling off a cliff. In the middle is figuring out how to be a good Mormon Catholic, or a happy Mormon Christian, or something that works for you and everyone.

Again, quiet times and careful thinking, reflection, prayer, and maybe professional counseling are in order for you for the next few months or even longer.

KATHERINE: Thank you again for your calming voice. I especially enjoyed the image of a screaming, arms-flailing woman jumping off a cliff!

I have asked my husband to fill out the questionnaire you sent me; when he is done, I thought we could talk about our responses. I shared with him our earlier email

exchanges (at least the first few), but he hasn't seen the last exchange. We have now talked several times since my "outburst." Our conversations had been getting increasingly frustrating until a few nights ago when I was able to tell him that I love him and really need his support, that I don't want to do anything to destroy this marriage, but that I am suffering immensely and need to share that with him and have him listen. He told me he is fearful that I am beginning to direct my anger at him. I tried to assure him that I am not angry with him, but that I want to be able to be honest with him and share when I am angry and not feel as if he would prefer just to keep his head in the sand and wait for this storm to blow over. I think he has made an effort over the last couple of days to allow me to express myself and seems willing to work with me.

KATHERINE (just recently): I received the latest SUNSTONE, and the first thing I read was the Borderlands article, "Why We Stay."² I have been thinking about making my list of "Why I should—or should not—stay." I haven't actually started to write it yet. I am a little nervous to actually put it on paper, but I have been putting quite a bit of thought into it. When I do eventually set about writing it out, I will let you know how it goes.

Edward and I seem to be relating a little better with one another lately, although, admittedly, I am mostly keeping quiet. Not sure if that is good.

JEFF: Sometimes it is wise to be quiet. But eventually you'll need to rely on mature, adult, respectful, and loving communication with Edward. You two might need to get some counseling to make it happen, though. We all know how to talk. Some of us know how to listen, but few of us know how to really communicate effectively and consistently with our spouses. It is a skill set that one must learn. Some counselors teach couple communication skills. Look for someone who will do that for you both.

I'm glad you're taking your time. Time is the great teacher and healer, as they say. My guess is that when you've looked at all the factors very thoughtfully, you'll find a compromising way to meet the needs of your family, Edward, and yourself.

Keep in mind, too, that "staying" and "going" aren't your only two options. (We generally don't like absolutes here in the Borderlands.) There are ways of staying and

going at the same time. Many of us do that although we may not be aware of it.

(I will keep readers updated with Part II of Katherine's story as it unfolds.)

AN UPDATE FROM JARED

JARED has been struggling for years with how to deal with doubts and questions and his future in the Church.³ I will close the column with this update on his story.

JARED: I believe I have finally found my course. My wife and I have quit the intellectual thrashing about, trying to find what truth and reality are. We've prayed earnestly and tearfully for help from "above" in learning just what this life is all about, what we should do for the future of our children, and the course we should take to optimize our eternal destinies together.

For me, the answer partly came after I had decided not to go to church the next day and be subjected to boring, repetitious talks. As I lay in bed, semi-awake, some strange knowledge came to me just after I thought, "I am not going to go to church tomorrow." This something said, "Yes, you will! You will go and sit with your family and enjoy it!" I then thought, "OK, I promised." And so I did. And the more I did, the more often and more definitely that prompting came to me.

Both my wife and I (and our daughter) are now convinced that life as a good member of the LDS church is what is best for us. It certainly is not for everyone, but it works for us. Mainly, it gives us an opportunity to serve others, and that is what life is all about.

For the first time in more than twelve years, we went to the temple just last week. And yes, we had answered the temple recommend questions honestly. When asked the questions, we said, "We *choose* to believe; we *choose* to accept, and so forth." There is no dishonesty or hypocrisy in that, as some have suggested.

NOTES

1. John-Charles Duffy, "Mapping Book of Mormon Historicity Debates—Part II: Perspectives from the Sociology of Knowledge" (SUNSTONE, December 2008), 49.

2. D. Jeff Burton, "Why We Stay," (SUNSTONE, May 2009), 50–51.

3. Jared's story can be found in the May 2005, September 2005, and December 2006 issues of SUNSTONE.