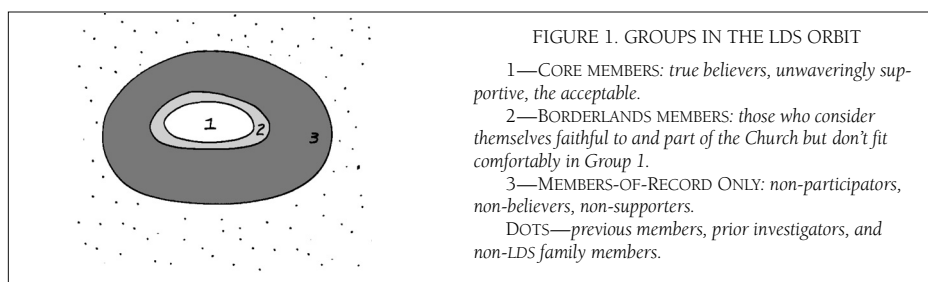


BRAVING THE BORDERLANDS . . .

TWO PATHS,
ONE MARRIAGE

by D. Jeff Burton



I EXCHANGED THE following messages (edited for brevity and clarity) with Brad (not his real name), a forty-something professional living in the Northwest who now finds himself in the Borderlands.¹

JEFF: What precipitated your recent experiences?

BRAD: During the summer and fall of 2005, my wife lost her faith in Mormonism, Christianity, and organized religion in general. While this was a liberating experience for her, my world fell apart. I was forced to question most of what I had held sacred—things like how a husband and wife should make their spiritual journey together, the divinity of the Church, and the mission of Joseph Smith. Things I had once taken for granted had become a subject for debate, which was hard because I was very comfortable with the path I was on. I thought I had received spiritual confirmations to my religious questions.

At the time, I was the priest quorum's advisor. In a lesson I gave immediately after the bombshell struck. I told the young men to imagine that President Hinckley dissolved the Church and we were all left to fend for ourselves. What parts of our religion would we continue with? What things would we continue doing, not just because we have a checklist to follow, but because it is the right thing to do? Would we continue to pay 10 percent to worthy organizations? Obey the

Word of Wisdom? Read the scriptures? Obviously, my feelings on the subject were close to the surface, and I broke down in tears in front of the class.

JEFF: Before you go on, how would you describe your upbringing in the Church?

BRAD: My father was a bishop, and we were one of the stalwart families in the ward, always serving when and where needed. I served a successful mission in Colombia, graduated from BYU, and married a nearly-perfect woman in the temple. Meanwhile, my mother subscribed to SUNSTONE, *Dialogue* and *Exponent II*. From time to time I picked up a SUNSTONE, but I found the tone a bit too "in your face" and felt that it was almost mocking the faithful members of the Church. It seemed to smack of intellectual superiority. Even though I was aware of and sympathetic to many views regarding LDS "problem areas," I made a conscious decision to spend my limited time reading mainline Church publications.

JEFF: So what did you do about your bombshell dilemma?

BRAD: After my wife made her announcement, I understood that if I were to leave her, many ward members would support that decision. But my family is more important to me than anything—even more important to me than the Church. So I knew had to con-

front the issues my wife had raised and make peace with them and with her. For the next year, I worked on doing that. Ironically, SUNSTONE and *Mormon Stories* podcasts were a great help to me during this journey.

Of course, I approached my quest from a background of belief, starting with my lifetime assumption of the divinity of the Church. Thousands of years of evolution have taught kids to believe what their parents teach. So I have always believed in the Book of Mormon and all things that follow. I know that I will never be able to change that part of myself, but sometimes I wish I could have done my search with a clean slate and a truly objective point of view. Because of that, I particularly enjoy the viewpoints of converts to the Church—people who have found the Church on their own. I especially enjoy the viewpoints of converts who are also members of the Sunstone community. These are members of the Church who have seen its faults and follies and continue to participate. They have a perspective that I will never have, and I draw from their strength.

JEFF: What is your current status in the Church? What about your wife?

BRAD: I am still very active in the church. I hold a temple recommend and serve in the elders quorum. I was recently released from two great years teaching the monster-boys in Primary. I don't usually attend "bureaucratic" meetings, e.g. priesthood leadership meeting, mostly because my wife bristles when I leave the family to do administrative church stuff. She is much more understanding when I leave to actually help people. I realize that I will probably never have a "significant" church calling again. But I spend more time with my family than anyone I know. We are good at having fun because we practice a lot! Despite her deep concerns, my wife attends church regularly—mostly sacrament meetings—and she has a calling as an organist and pianist.

JEFF: How open and honest are you with others about your situation?

BRAD: We keep it quiet because we don't want my wife or me to become the ward project, apostate, or outcast. There is much suspicion toward those who do not toe the party line in the Church, and we don't need that. She is more comfortable with her spirituality than ever before and doesn't feel the need to explain it. Our wonderful bishop knows the situation. My parents, one very good friend, and one missionary companion are also

D. JEFF BURTON is an author and a former member of the Sunstone Board of Directors.

aware. But that is it. The only reason those people know is because I needed help dealing with the issues, not because my wife needs help. She has kept it completely to herself. As our children get older, they will have their suspicions. Our 13-year-old is fairly astute and must know that something is up. Their mom doesn't pray or take the sacrament (unless she is in front of the congregation at the organ—she doesn't need the whole ward wondering about her worthiness) and they notice that.

JEFF: Why haven't your kids been more curious about the whole experience, especially with your wife not taking the sacrament?

BRAD: I don't know. They know that she is a bit of a non-conformist, so they probably chalk it up to that. Six months ago, in the middle of the sacrament, my youngest daughter asked me in the middle of the sacrament why girls don't participate in the blessing and passing. I whispered to her that men and women have different responsibilities. She literally rolled her eyes and in the most sarcastic tone she could muster, said, "Yeah, right!" My wife smiled and said, "From the mouths of babes!"

JEFF: When the kids do ask, what do you plan to tell them?

BRAD: I will leave it to my wife to explain her own situation. For my part, I will be straight and tell them that there are things about the Church that Mom does not accept but Dad does. The key will be to let them make their own decisions. Our kids are 13, 10 and 7, and even now I have a fairly good idea where they will land when that time comes.

JEFF: How has your current situation affected you?

BRAD: I feel very comfortable in church. I don't always agree with what is said or what is going on, but that would be true in any large organization. I have ancestors from several lines that were in Nauvoo, so this is *my* church and these are *my* people, warts and all. I have always been a bit of a rebel, not interested at all in conformity, so my views (for better or for worse) fit nicely with my personality. I love to feel the Spirit and look forward more than ever to these special and, most often, unexpected moments.

For example, six months ago I reading a lot from Bushman, Brodie, Palmer, and others about Joseph Smith. My ward had a sacrament meeting where members of the congregation told a personal story about one of the hymns, and then we would sing it as a congregation. One member requested "Praise to the Man." I don't even remember the story that went with the hymn, but as soon as we got to the first chorus, I was completely overcome with the spirit that told me that Joseph Smith really was a prophet, in spite of all of the things I was in the middle of studying. I had tears running down my face and couldn't finish the hymn. That was a very unexpected moment to feel the Spirit. It was very well timed.

JEFF: What coping mechanisms do you find helpful?

BRAD: As a liberal Democrat, I spend a lot of time rolling my eyes at what goes on in church. I take comfort in the fact that everybody wants what they think is best; they just have different ways of going about it. I try to be tolerant of ignorance and stupidity and try

to be humble at the same time! (Not always easy.) More than ever I realize that there are many shades of gray and that every person has to deal with issues on a personal level. I am much more tolerant than I used to be.

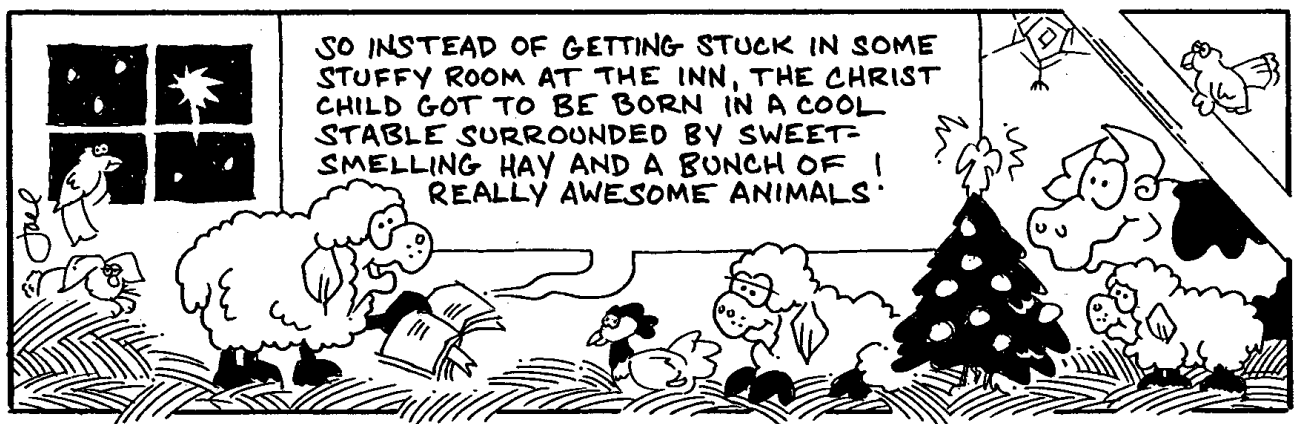
JEFF: What would it take for you to be honest and open with those who don't know about your situation?

BRAD: I would not have a problem sharing my own views with anyone who asked. I am open in some ways already. For example, when we studied the Book of Mormon in Primary this year, the first lesson was on the importance of the book to our Church. I told the class members that as they get older, they will hear some unexpected things about Joseph Smith and that some of those things are even true! My point was not to start them on the road to apostasy (although some would accuse me of that) but to prepare them for the inevitable day when they have to face those issues. I want them to know that I have faced those same issues and still have faith in the mission of the Church. I would rather they hear it from me than someone with questionable motives.

JEFF: How is your wife coping with her experiences?

BRAD: My wife spends a lot of time reading spiritual books. She has taken a special interest in Buddhism. We talk about what she finds significant. However, I am very careful when I draw parallels with what she is reading and what is taught in the Church. Occasionally I become a punching bag for all she finds distasteful about the Church and am subjected to a bit of a rant. (I always agree with her when that happens!) My wife is ex-

Pontius' Puddle



traordinarily supportive of the kids at church and helps them with their Primary talks and assignments. If it weren't for the kids and me, she would not attend. I am very grateful to her that church attendance has not become a bone of contention. I know how hard it is for her and truly appreciate her efforts. If she is ever released from playing piano or organ, she may decide not to attend. She has made it clear that attending Sunday School and Relief Society is not an option.

JEFF: What does your personal religion look like now?

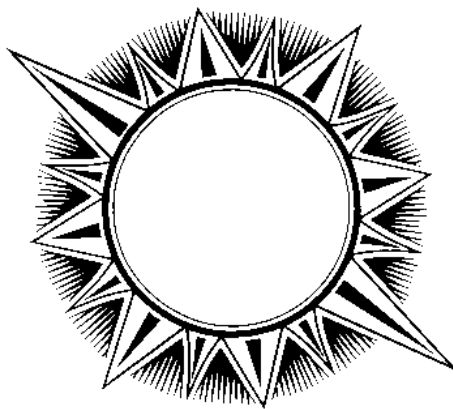
BRAD: I find that my religious observance is more meaningful than ever before. I do things because I feel they will be of value to me and my family, not merely because I am supposed to. Even though I have always been tolerant of the beliefs of others, I am now able to truly appreciate beliefs that are different from my own. I have, on occasion, been stricken with twinges of Catholic envy, something I never would have thought possible during my two years in South America. I feel a true affinity with those in the Unitarian Fellowship who are much more closely aligned with me politically and socially than are most of my Mormon friends. I feel at home in their places of worship.

My wife talks about breaking free from the Mormon box and partaking of all that is good, even those things outside of the box. I feel like I too have broken free of that box. The difference between us is that my feet remain firmly planted in that box even as the rest of my body is able to experience things on the outside.

An ah-ha moment came for me recently when I realized that participating in any religion is like playing a game. Within the context of that game, the rules are everything. If you choose to participate, you choose to make yourself subject to a certain set of rules and practices. I have chosen to participate in Mormonism (although since I was born in the Church, some may argue that point).

JEFF: You mentioned Unitarian Fellowship. What do you do with that group?

BRAD: For the past year, my daughter's violin recitals have been at the local Unitarian Fellowship sanctuary. We arrived at the last recital early, and as I wandered around, I came across the bulletin board. It was full of announcements of causes I feel strongly about: peace vigils, discussions on the evils



I don't know where we will be in ten years. I do know that even though I was dragged kicking and screaming into the Borderlands, it is a good place to be and I am glad for the journey!

of imperialism and unrestrained capitalism, anti-war speeches, fundraisers for the local women's care shelter and men's homeless shelter. I feel like I would have a sense of brotherhood in this congregation that is completely different from the brotherhood I feel at church.

My wife picked up an information card that mentions the Universalist tenet of accepting all beliefs. The card also specifically states that they are not interested in conformity. She was much impressed. It hit me that they would accept a believing Mormon as a member of their congregation! From a strictly social view, my wife and I would fit in much better there with our granola tendencies, our Subaru, and our garage-sale wardrobe than we do in the white bread, consumerism culture of Mormonism.

JEFF: So what do you see in the future for you and your family?

BRAD: I don't know where we will be in ten years. I do know that even though I was dragged kicking and screaming into the Borderlands, it is a good place to be and I am glad for the journey!

I will hang in there and do my small part to engender change in this little corner of the world. For example, I never talked with the Primary boys about Heavenly Father, only about Heavenly Parents. It's a small thing, but I hope one that will have an effect. I don't have a problem telling people about things I find troubling. I mentioned to my Primary

boys that I do not like the story of Abraham's sacrificing Isaac. Not only does that help them to see that they don't have to blindly agree with everything they are taught, it also helps them develop critical thinking skills.

Although I am always careful about overplaying my agitator role, I've never had a problem being the one to shout out "the King is naked!" More often than not, others have agreed with me who would not have spoken out otherwise. (Ward members seem to love me in spite of my occasional boat-rocking!)

JEFF: What would you like the Church to do about the things that brought you into the Borderlands?

BRAD: The Church is in a very tough position. On the one hand, it can't appear to be suppressing information, but it has no duty to share information that may undermine its claims. I think we all have embarrassing things in our

pasts that we would like to have left alone. On the other hand, I love the fact that the Church publishes *View of the Hebrews*³ and that is working on the Joseph Smith Papers Project. I think the leadership beginning to realize that providing accurate and full information is more helpful to the cause than suppressing information is.

NOTES

1. In my first column (this is the thirtieth), 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 the figure.

2. For a free download of my book *For Those Who Wonder* and previous Borderland columns, see FORTHOSHOWONDER.COM.

3. See: <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/cdm4/document.php?CISOROOT=/rsc&CISOPTR=6572&REC=19>.

Please send me your experiences from life in the Borderlands.

*D. Jeff Burton,
jeff@eburton.com*