

The Challenge of Honesty

At this 2015 SLC Sunstone Symposium, Dan Wotherspoon and I will share the podium to examine the challenges of honesty for those in the Borderlands of today.^{1,2}

In times past, many faithful Borderlanders have not felt they could be honest about the way they believed when their beliefs did not follow a specific format, or did not fully support the policies or official history of the Church. Here are three examples of messages sent to me in the past (shortened for this presentation):

“I’ve been in the closet all my life, even to my family. I don’t like the dishonesty but what other choice does the church give me?”

“I recognize that I’m a hypocrite. To get a temple recommend I agree to statements that I don’t literally believe. In essence, I lie. I don’t like this, but I don’t believe any greater good would be served by my quitting the church and hurting my husband and children.”

“One of my sons asked me about going on a mission. I do think a mission can be a positive thing, but I expressed some thoughts to him that were fabrications. I feel like my soul is tied between two poles; one that continues to pretend and lie, and the other that longs to express my true feelings. I feel like I’m tearing in half.”

These are the worrisome kinds of things we used to hear from Borderlanders all the time. But in today’s world, we don’t have to settle for being dishonest. And it is easier to be honest when we understand the complexities of honesty and know and follow a few rules and principles, as summarized below in the following six sections.

1. Complexities and definitions. First, recognize that honesty is a very complex principle. “Being honest” has many meanings, nuances and different ways to be applied. What seems honest can be both honest and hurtful (another sin) at the same time, depending on a number of factors. We have to be quite thoughtful about what we say when honesty is an issue--which it almost always is in any communication. And honesty must be applied

personally, with each of us determining what it means to be honest and loving in the moment and for the situation.

Complexity. If you google the words honesty and dishonesty, you’ll find scores of meanings, synonyms and related words. For example, for honesty you can find words that add deep complexities to the simple idea of honesty, e.g., emotional honesty, personal honesty, public honesty, blunt honesty, brutally honest, tactfully honest, undisciplined honesty, white lies; being transparent, true, trustworthy, truthful, upfront, open, upright, veracious, virtuous, fair, forth right, authentic, frank, fully honest, genuine, high-minded, honorable, impartial and just.

For “dishonesty” consider the considerable nuances associated with these less-than-honest concepts: biased, white lies, black lies, cheating, deceitful, deceptive, deceiving, devious, exaggeration, false, feigning, fraudulent, holding back, inaccurate, incomplete information, insincere, spinning, stretching the truth, truthiness, unfair, unjust, unreal, unreliable, untrustworthy, plagiarism and untruthful.

Not all honesty definitions are loving and kind. Think “brutally honest.” Not all dishonesty definitions are bad. A slight exaggeration of your spouse’s good looks can be quite loving and helpful (and often inadvertent when we’re in love). Note finally that “white lies” show up in both definitions!

Social psychologist Dan Ariely has conducted a number of experiments that illuminate our concept of honesty and demonstrate its fascinating limits.³ While some take for granted that being honest is the result of some cost-benefit calculation (e.g., going to hell for lying), Ariely has found that there is an internal moral compass which obeys more complex rules. People are given over to less than totally honest behaviors when, for example, they justify their behaviors by bending rules, or resigning themselves to the idea that “I can’t be totally honest in my situation,” just to mention a few.

That sounds bad, but on the other hand being “perfectly” and “completely” honest all the time can be undesirable...and impossible. Our concepts of politeness and caring for others, for example, often imply or require concealing or coloring the external or perfect facts. (Examples: “How do I look today, dear?” “How’s your health today?” “Do you know that God exists?”) So some of our values are not always consistent with what we may think of

“honesty,” and that's sometimes okay. There are times when such full truth-telling becomes “brutal honesty.”

Communication. Good communications (or the lack of it) impacts our ability to “be honest.” We can have every intention of being honest but then be thwarted by inadequate or inaccurate communications. Communicating doesn't just include talking. We communicate in lots of ways. My voice might suggest honesty but my demeanor may not be telling the same truth. “Sure I like going to Church,” plus rolled eyes or a tilt of my head can suggest something deeper and more meaningful about how much I like some church meetings.

Summary. Given the complexities, it is difficult to be “perfectly” honest. Such “honesty” can disturb others. It can effect others' testimonies. It may cause confusion and consternation among friends, family members, and especially, our children.

Care, tact and timing are thus important facets of “being honest.” Consideration for our children, our spouses and others requires careful management of our true (current) beliefs, feelings, and desires and how we express them.

Finally, recognize that no one can be 100% accurate all the time. (And we shouldn't be, for that matter.) Science comes as close to “being totally honest” as anyone in this world. But even in science, “truth” can only be known in degrees of confidence. “Climate change is occurring,” might be stated at a 97% confidence level, looking at all the scientific data. But that means there is a three percent chance that it isn't changing. (As an aside, is it honest for climate change deniers to grasp onto and speak only of the 3%?)

2. It is easier to be honest today. It is important to recognize that the Church is making it easier for us to be more open now. President Uctdorf, Elder Holland, and other general leaders have recently said things like, “We all have doubts and questions...” and, “Honestly acknowledge your questions and your concerns...” It used to be if you had questions or doubts you were supposed to keep your thoughts to yourself. No longer!

As reported in the Salt Lake Tribune by Peggy Fletcher Stack, Elder D. Todd Christofferson recently said, “We have individual members in the church with a variety of different opinions, beliefs and positions... In our view, that doesn't really become a problem unless someone is out attacking the church and its leaders — if it's a deliberate and

persistent effort to try to get others to follow them, trying to draw others away, trying to pull people, if you will, out of the church or away from its teachings and doctrines.”

So it is easier to be open and honest as long as we follow certain reasonable guidelines. But honesty is still a universal issue (for all Mormons, not just Borderland Mormons). And it requires thought, care and preparation to be honest. Read on.

3. Situations where honesty is an issue. There are some times and events where being honest and authentic is a potentially bigger issue than at other times. For example:

- During temple recommend (TR) interviews.
- When sharing your story / feelings / doubts / concerns / desires with your spouse, parents, other relatives, friends (at the ward, members), friends (non-members), regular ward members, co-workers at the job, and on-line (e.g., Facebook).
- While serving in an important Church calling.
- At tithing settlement.
- When bearing testimony.
- Giving lessons in Church.
- Participating in class.
- If you're employed by the Church.
- If your boss is a TBM.

Think about each of these potential encounters and situations and how you do or would deal with them.

A good approach for the TR interview, for example, is to get the list of questions beforehand and practice how you will answer each one “honestly.”

Roll playing is often helpful. Talking it over with friends, loved ones, or other Borderlands can also help you prepare. See the following paragraphs for more examples.

4. Personal traits and enablers that cause or allow us to be “less accurate,” “less than totally honest,” or “lovingly honest.” In many cases, we allow ourselves to be, or we can be drawn into being, less than totally honest, often without our even realizing it. “Being honest,” as an ideal, is much like “being patient” or “being kind.” It takes thoughtful management of the various forces and enablers we encounter to achieve a “loving honesty” and not drop into unacceptable dishonesty. If we recognize and understand these personal traits and enablers, we can better manage them. See the following “traits and enablers” list:

-a- *Being a good influencer or manipulator.* I once watched an ambitious Stake High Councilman from our ward manipulating our Stake President. It seemed pretty clear, to me anyway, that he wanted to be the next Bishop, a change due in about a year. He was the first to volunteer for anything the SP wanted someone to do. He stood in meetings and publicly supported the SP in anything he said. He befriended the SP's wife and his older children. And yes, he was called to be our next bishop. He turned out to be a very good bishop, actually. Now, was that sucking-up behavior dishonest? In some minds, yes, it went too far. But in this case the outcome was okay. So, on occasion, influencing others and gentle manipulation is acceptable, if not carried to extremes. Think about how you get your kids to do what you want them to do. "Hey, time to shut down your [device] for dinner...[no response]. Hey, I've got some cookies here for you ...[for after dinner]." We all manipulate. We just have to make sure it doesn't get out of hand and have negative aspects or outcomes that hurt us or others

-b- *Having conflicts of interest.* We all have conflicts of interest. One example of a "good" conflict of interest is seen every day in every mission. When I was on my mission, if asked why I wanted to baptize people, I would give the "presenting reason" first: "Because their lives will be better and fuller. They will be much happier." That was true, of course, but the conflict of interest arose because I also really wanted the baptism so my proselyting success record would look better.

There was one case where I suspected a young man might have some family troubles if he joined the Church at his age and place in his family, but that didn't stop me from hoping to get him baptized. I rationalized that "he will be better off in the end." So again, it requires a balance, a willingness to think about the matter and determine if we have crossed the line into dishonesty. Same for all of the enabling situations and conditions in Section 4.

-c- *Wanting or needing acceptance.* We all want to feel like part of the group. We want to be accepted. Some of our group may be disturbed if we said what we really believe or feel, so we often keep our thoughts to ourselves. Is this dishonest? Yes, it can get out of hand if our silence is interpreted wrongly. "He must be a true believer if he holds a temple recommend and is serving a mission." "She must love the Book of Mormon because she teaches from it so well." Again, balance. Strike a balance. Look inward to determine if you've crossed the line from loving less-honesty to sinful dishonesty.

-d- *Willingness to tell "white lies."* Those who excuse themselves for telling "white lies" are usually doing it to benefit others. That's okay in limited circumstances, but we have to be very careful that we're not going too far, not actually hurting the other person, or not actually just benefiting ourselves.

-e- *Saying to yourself, "it will benefit others."* This is sometimes okay if all the other aspects of the gospel are being followed: loving one another, not being self-serving, not hurting someone, etc., and if the benefits far out-weigh the subtle misleading of someone else. Think of the first three personal quotes about being in the closet, lying to get a TR and lying to his son about a mission. In all such cases, these could possibly have been handled more thoughtfully and dishonesty and lying would not have been necessary.

-f- *Seeing others being dishonest and/or being in a culture or group that accepts or encourages dishonesty.* Is this an issue in Mormonism? Are staunch members ever "dishonest?" Do we see it in the broader Christianity? Do we even see instances of it in the Bible or Book of Mormon? You bet we do.

We could talk about the history of "lying for the Lord." Some get concerned about the Church withholding information when an apostle is ill. Or, not divulging exactly how it spends our tithing money. Some would call this lack of openness, this withholding of information, dishonesty. But I'm not there yet. I accept that our leaders need flexibility and privacy.

-g- *Being too selfish, prideful, self-serving.* These of course lead to real dishonesty. It requires a lot of self-knowledge to know where you are on these scales.

-h- *Feeling like "I'm supposed to be" dishonest.* We've all felt like this at times. The TR questions are a good example. There have been few in any ward I've ever lived in that could answer those questions 100% accurately and without some caveats. I've been a bishop's counselor twice and a Branch President and I've had experiences with people seeking TRs.

I think the originators of these questions saw them as ideals, something we should be working to achieve. Every new bishop is surprised by (and then irritated by) the waffling and anxiety members

show when trying to answer the questions. One bishop told me something like, "I wish people would just say "yes" to the questions and don't try to explain all their problems to me. If someone comes to me and wants a TR and they want to go to the temple, and can cover the basics, then I want to give them the recommend."

On another matter, the church at one time outlined what a testimony should consist of at testimony meeting. It was really hard to fit into that mold for people like us. Fortunately, those rules have been relaxed and we can now get up and say things like, "I don't know for sure everything, but I have faith that I'm doing the right thing and I thank God for all my blessings."

-i- *Wanting or needing influence, control and even power.* We all want to influence and control our environment and those things that effect our lives. But like my friend working on the Stake President so he could be bishop, it needs to be controlled so we don't graduate to the "wanting power over others" level.

-j- *Willingness and ability to reason and rationalize.* Reasoning and rationalizing are cousins. Reasoning is dealing with facts, data and evidence, while rationalizing is adding "what ifs," imagined "goods," and desired outcomes. Sometimes we start with reasoning and end up with rationalizing.

Imagine your daughter announces she is getting married in the temple. You don't have a temple recommend. It is quite easy to reason or rationalize your way into a TR. "The family will be unhappy because I'm not there." It will be cruel not to support my (wife/daughter/parent) because I won't answer all the TR questions the right way." "I'll just do it this one time, and it won't matter." "The Church isn't fair here, so it's their fault I have to be a little less than totally honest to get a TR."

Now is this wrong? Not necessarily if not taken to extremes. Striking a loving balance may require you to be less than "brutally honest" for the good of your family (That's reasoning, or rationalizing, depending on your outlook.)

Some would say that all of these Section 4 items are just rationalizing. Yes, that can true. We must strike a balance, try to be as honest as possible, and not let such reasoning graduate to rationalizing too much. You will have to find a way that you, Jesus, God and our Mother in Heaven can live with.

Section 5 suggestions can help avoid over-doing rationalizing and be more honest.

5. Situations and conditions that make it easier to be "more accurate" or "more honest." The following suggestions can help you to be more spontaneously and naturally honest with yourself and others.

a- Understand, manage and control the potentially adverse situations and enabling conditions listed in Section 4.

b. *Make yourself a moral reminder.* Write something like this, for example, into your day planner: "It is Christ-like to be honest." Or, "When I speak to my mother tonight, I'm going to be tactfully honest."

c. *Make pledges or covenants.* The next time you go to the temple, add a personal covenant with God to be "more honest." Or, the next time you go out together, make a deal with your spouse for both of you to be "more open" with each other.

d. *Ask others to be honest with you.* When we openly expect others to be honest it help us to be more honest and authentic.

e. *Practice and role-play.* Let your spouse play the role of "the Bishop" at, for example, "a meeting where you are likely to be called to a new position in the ward."

f. *Develop an LDS-compatible personal religious model that includes "honesty."* See Column 18 for more information. [Footnote 1]

g. *Ask yourself: "How does God see me?"* Does He see you as "being honest?" What would Jesus say to you if he visited you today? Make adjustments, as necessary.

h. *Care about others.* When we care about others, we naturally find a happy mixture of honesty and love that shows we respect and care about them.

i. *Correct instances of "dishonesty"* We all make errors and we all distort the truth. Thus it is a fundamental principle of the gospel that we repent and make it right. "I mentioned to you last week that I have a testimony of the gospel. I need you to also understand that my testimony is based on faith, not knowledge."

6. TULCH: I have coined an acronym that can help us remember how to be honest in today's LDS world. TULCH stands for "Thoughtful, Unselfish, Loving, Correcting Honesty." It is the type of honesty that embodies all the principles outlined above.

Let's all be tulchable!

Footnote 1. A Borderland member is 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. All of the Borderland columns and my book, *For Those Who Wonder* are available for free download at: www.forthosewhowonder.com

Footnote 2. Dan is the Editor of a great book, *The Challenge of Honesty*, by Frances Lee Menlove, (Signature, 2013). He is also a former Editor of *Sunstone*.

Footnote 3. *The Honest Truth about Dishonesty*, Dan Ariely, HC Publications, 2014