

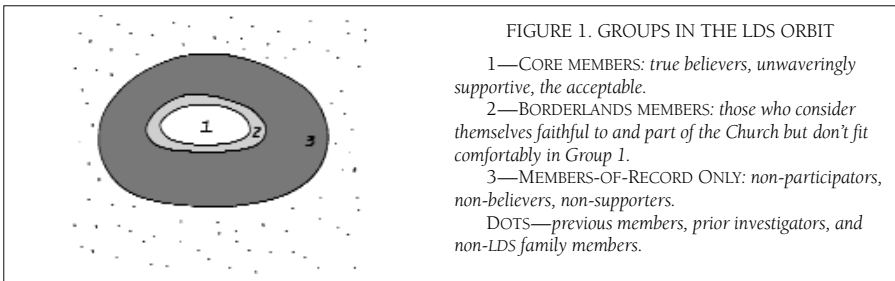
BRAVING THE BORDERLANDS . . .

A Borderlander Comes Out: Part 1

~~BORDERLANDS~~

~~MEMBERSHIP~~

by D. Jeff Burton



IN THIS COLUMN and the next¹ “Brett” shares his long-term experiences in the Borderlands and how he recently “came out” to his wife and others. I have condensed and edited email messages we exchanged over several months. I have also changed names and details to protect identities.

BRETT: I came across your website, through *StayLDS.com*. I suspected there were other Mormons who were going through the same struggles I am but I didn't know where to find them. Now I know. I'm going to subscribe to SUNSTONE, too. I'm 36 years old and by your definitions have been a very closeted “Borderlander” for about seven years now.

I was the youngest of three children growing up in Springville, Utah. My parents were active and married in the temple, but they divorced when I was about thirteen. We lived with my mother for five years before she remarried. I was greatly troubled by my parents' divorce and determined to find comfort in my own future family. I was inactive during many of my early teenage years due the family disruption and other factors, but

during my senior year of high school I decided I was either going to make religion part of my life, or completely forget it. I figured it was “all or nothing” for me. So I decided to apply to BYU and try being really active for a year. If that year didn't feel right, I was going to drop religion entirely and move on.

But that was an amazing year. I read the Book of Mormon and gained a sense of personal spiritual guidance I had never experienced before. The Church “felt” right and seemed powerful. I served a mission (hardest thing I ever did), went back to BYU, married in the temple, started a family, launched a successful career, and, until seven years ago, did everything possible to adhere to the requirements of the Church.

My first small doubts started at BYU after my mission when a religion professor mentioned that there were three versions of Joseph Smith's first vision. But the real doubts hit seven years ago. I had become curious about what exactly “anti-Mormon literature” was. (I have always been a curious person.) I thought, “If the Church is true, it doesn't matter what gets fired at it. It will stand any test.” I began

with the big gun: *ExMormon.org*. As you can imagine, I was completely blindsided by the experience, but I kept it all to myself until just last night when I finally told my wife some of my questions.

JEFF: What made you decide to come clean after all these years?

BRETT: Actually, my first attempt at mentioning my doubts to Mandy happened seven years ago right after my experience with the *ExMormon.org* website. But she was visibly shaken when I very cautiously told her I was maybe starting to question some cherished Mormon traditions, so I quickly stopped. I wanted to keep peace between us so I have been shielding her from my doubts. But the more I studied and attempted to get the facts, the worse my attitude got and the more scared I became. I had to live a double life during that time.

But it all came crashing down a couple of months ago when I came home after one of “those Sundays” where I had been in meetings all day and was irate about how inefficient and repetitive PEC and Ward Council were. Anyway, Mandy asked what was wrong and I began sobbing. I said something like, “I don't know if the Church is totally true. I don't think I have a strong testimony anymore.” I was literally crying on my wife's shoulder. She did what she could to comfort me, but I could tell this was hard for her.

We dropped the discussion right then, though, and not much more had been said about it until last night when we had a “midnight argument” about some silly little thing unrelated to this issue. But one thing led to another and I ended up telling her about some of my specific doubts and questions. I also talked to her about me being in the closet all these years, how I couldn't be myself, how I thought she would judge me, and how I thought our relationship would be jeopardized. I told her that I didn't want to leave the Church but that I was seriously wrestling with how to reconcile all this. Amazingly, she was very kind and comforting. I was so relieved. Now that I think she probably won't leave me regard-

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less of what happens, I feel it is somewhat safe to be honest with her about the rest of my doubts. It's still hard to talk, but at least it is out there now.

JEFF: The outcomes of your initial discussions look promising. It might help you to know that your thoughts, conclusions, and questions are all natural and common to those in the Borderlands. And from what I've seen in others like you, I think you will find ways of "reconciling all this" eventually, though you will need to be patient and give it time. I know this is hard, but try not to get too stressed, and don't make any sudden or hasty decisions. See how things go for a week or two. When you find a good moment, share a little more with Mandy and gauge her reaction.

BRETT: [About a week later.] Yesterday Mandy told me that it bothers her that I have been in the borderlands for so long (seven years) while pretending like nothing is wrong. It seems hypocritical to her. She's right, but I didn't feel I could be open with anyone about it. I told her that I kept it all in because 1) I was worried that she might leave me, and 2) church culture usually paints doubters as "sinful" or "weak." That explanation made some sense to her, and she softened and assured me that she would never leave me even if I "decided to scrap the whole religion." However, she did mention that I haven't been reading the scriptures or praying recently, and suggested that maybe I need to "go to the source" to figure things out for myself again so that I could be honest with her and my family about my beliefs.

JEFF: You are certainly fortunate to have a caring and understanding spouse. There have been much worse responses in many other cases. I admire her desire for you to be honest with her and your family. But remember that there are times and places to be honest, and that tact is very important. It's usually best to stick with an honesty that is kind and thoughtful.

As for Mandy's suggestion that you "go to the source," I think that is a reasonable request. Perhaps you two might pray together every day (for your family, to

strengthen your marriage, to collect as much insight or inspiration as you can). This will set her mind at ease and can make it seem that you both have gone the extra mile for your relationship. In any case, doing something like this should bring you to a good place together. My feeling is that when both parties share such experiences, they tend to merge or come closer in their thinking and believing.

But I wouldn't suggest trying to convince her of anything or trying to "correct" her thinking. It's best to ask, "Do you want to know what I'm thinking or what I've learned about that?" If she wants to hear, then be gentle, tactful, and kind as you explain your thoughts. But if she says, "No, not right now," then don't push your thinking onto her.

As for your observation that church culture paints doubters as sinful or weak, yes, there are many members out there who have those kinds of attitudes. There are others, however, who will sympathize with you, though mostly in private. You are likely not the only closeted person in your ward. If you "come out" to whatever extent you feel comfortable, you may find people with similar thoughts with whom you can develop a relationship.

BRETT: I keep feeling a pressure to make a decision about where I'm going with this: "In or out?"

JEFF: I don't think that it needs be an "in or out" proposition. The Church's own studies have shown that there are a significant proportion of active members (about 25-30% in English speaking areas) who have (mostly secret) questions or doubts. These members are often moving through phases of belief, doubt, and wonderment. But this is where faith comes in. If we don't have questions, doubts, or temptations, we don't need faith. The fourth Article of Faith puts faith as the first principle of the gospel for a reason. It might be helpful for you to reassure your wife that you intend to be "faithful." Try being faithful to your family first, then to your covenants, and then to the Church.

BRETT: [A few days later.] Mandy suggested that that if I have an open mind and rely on the "Golden Four"—prayer, reading the scriptures, going to church, and obeying the commandments, I might "come back." I doubt this will work. I'm at the point where reading the Book of Mormon is almost distasteful; I just can't see it in the same light anymore.

JEFF: I don't think it would hurt anything to try some version of the Golden Four. It will reassure her that you respect her and are willing to work with her on these issues. (As an aside, I've never personally known a doubting Borderlander who reverted back to a full "knowing testimony." They are usually too curious and doubtful to believe all Church claims without some lingering questions.)

In my own personal case, when asked in interviews if I know Joseph Smith is a prophet, for example, I'll respond with something like, "I don't think I know anything with pure surety. It is in my nature to be skeptical. I tend to see things in a "statistical significance" way. So I have a 99% surety in the claim that Joseph Smith lived. As for whether God and Jesus appeared to Joseph and gave him the specific instructions described in the official version of the First Vision, I'm pretty confident something happened, but I'm not sure what. However, I'm willing to accept the possibility that the story might be factual, and I'll behave as if it is." You get the idea.

BRETT: Mandy also suggested that if I can't regain a testimony about the Church then maybe I shouldn't be performing priesthood ordinances for our family, or teaching classes in church. Her comment was, "The young men in our ward need someone to be their leader who can testify to the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith, and if you can't do that, maybe they need someone else who can." Any thoughts?

JEFF: You can reassure Mandy that many men without a "knowing" testimony perform ordinances all the time. The key is faithfulness to what the Church expects

you to *do*, not what they expect you to *know*. It is not the priesthood holder who holds the power to baptize and wash away sins, for example, it is the priesthood itself that has that power. You have been given the authority to act in the name of the priesthood and to use its power. (I think that's the official interpretation, anyway.)

As for bearing testimony, I've never had a knowing testimony. I've never said that I knew the "Church was true," or that "Joseph Smith was a prophet," but that hasn't kept me from serving two missions, serving in two bishoprics, serving on the high council, etc. When I "bear testimony," I say things like, "I know the Church is having a positive impact on the lives of its members," "I believe God is involved in the lives of people," etc. That seems to have been acceptable to those above me.

BRETT: [About two weeks later.] Things are going okay with Mandy, but this has been a difficult experience for both of us. I'm willing to fight tooth and nail through this process but I'm at the point now where I feel I have to start being honest with others about my thoughts, feelings, and convictions. If this jeopardizes my ability to do what I want to do at Church, like exercise the priesthood for my children, I'm not sure how I will handle it. What do you think?

JEFF: I'm not sure "fighting tooth and nail" is the best metaphor. But being dedicated to the process, and searching for ways to be open and honest without causing a lot of stress for you or your family is certainly worth the effort in the long run.

Obviously you should put your relationships first. If coming out to others could jeopardize your process with Mandy, maybe holding off for a while makes sense. As time passes, you'll find ways of being honest with others so that problems don't crop up. I think you can see this will take time and patience on your part, and on the part of your wife. If you two are open with each other, working as a team, you'll make slow but steady progress. You should definitely in-

clude Mandy in any decision to come out to the bishop or anyone else that Mandy might know.

To be continued in our next column.

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1. In my first column (this is Column ~~40~~), 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. All columns are available for free download at: www.forthosewhowonder.com.