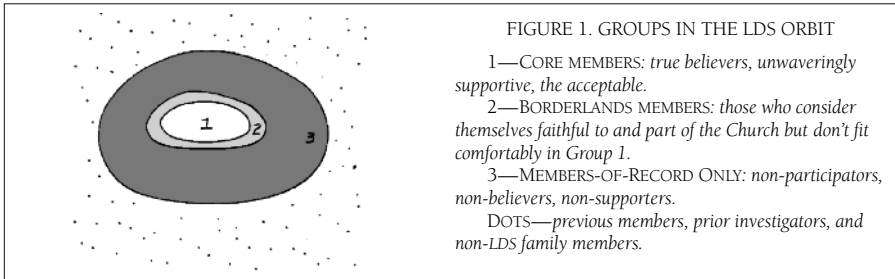


BRAVING THE BORDERLANDS . . .

A BORDERLANDER
COMES OUT: PART II

by D. Jeff Burton



THIS COLUMN¹ CONTINUES the saga of Brett (a Borderlander who is in the process of coming out to his family and others) and his wife, Mandy. I have condensed and edited emails we exchanged over several months. I've also changed names and some details to protect identities.

BRETT: Mandy and I have had several more discussions, some of them very emotional. We are finding out a lot more about where the other is at, and have actually become closer in our relationship. She has discovered that I am not as far off the cliff as she had initially perceived, and watching her make room for my point of view has made me love her even more.

JEFF: I really enjoy hearing success stories like this. You and Mandy are doing the right thing. In a few years, you'll both laugh at how serious it all seemed "back then when we were so excitable."

See if Mandy would be willing to read *For those Who Wonder*. It will give her a better idea of what you are going through. It also has some material that can help her interact with you even more construc-

tively. See, for example, Chapter 1, "Helping Those with Religious Questions and Doubts."²

As you two continue to work together, it's likely that you'll move toward having similar views. She will come to know, for example, that relevant questions about the Church do exist, and you will come to know that there are more important things than "whether or not the Book of Mormon is accurate history." Plus, you will have successfully worked together to overcome a major, potentially divisive problem, which can establish communication patterns that can help you solve other problems that might arise (financial, parental, sexual).

BRETT: The people who currently know about my concerns are my wife, my brother and his wife, and two good local friends. I would have no problems telling my parents if it were pertinent. I am still trying to decide whether I should tell my bishop, though. He is a very nice guy, but I'm concerned that if I mention something to him it might not stay confidential for long. One friend says I should tell the stake president instead. A second friend

says I should just keep my mouth shut and roll with the punches. Any ideas?

JEFF: Given only those two choices, I would probably side with your second friend, at least for the time being. No need to add more burdens to the load you and Mandy are already carrying. However, before telling any leader, I think it is important for you to examine your motives for telling them. What do you hope to accomplish? How would it help (or hinder) your long-term goals? Reasons to come out to leaders might include: to simply be honest, to enlist their help, to avoid any more callings, or to vent your anger at the Church. Obviously some motives are more constructive than others.

BRETT: That's good advice. I've decided to hold off for now.

Another issue: How do closet doubters who teach at church deal with teaching those one-sided, sanitized lessons that don't give a full picture of the subject?

JEFF: My attitude is, if we're going to play the Church's game, we need to obey most of its rules. I think you'll find that from time to time your class members will present opportunities for you to do some exploring, asking questions like "Is it true that Joseph Smith had more than one wife?" Or "How come the news reports say that a little wine is healthy for the body?" When something like that happens, I think you can feel free to answer or expand on it—in a non-threatening way. If someone else brings up a sensitive issue during class, you can try to provide an honest answer or open it to the class for discussion. Just keep your ears open for opportunities.

BRETT: I am amazed at the wide variety of emotions I am still experiencing. Sometimes I feel quite favorably toward the Church, and sometimes I want to see the stake center torn down.

JEFF: This emotional roller coaster ride is similar to many Borderlanders' experiences. But eventually, these shifts will smooth out as you establish new ways of

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

thinking about the Church and your place in it.

By the way, would Mandy like to join our conversations?

BRETT: She politely declined. Mandy doesn't like to talk about her feelings, even with me sometimes. I think the idea of sharing her fears/concerns/emotions with a complete stranger sounds too weird right now. It's hard enough for her to work through this with just me.

We don't talk about my Borderland status and issues every day. But when we do, I think she sees my progress as, "Yes, he is coming back!" But it's really more like, "Hey, I'm just focusing on the positive aspects of the Church. I'm still not sure where I stand." I don't think anyone can completely "come back" after they have gone through this journey.

For the last seven years, much of my spiritual behavior was almost self-destructive. My first response to feelings of betrayal by the Church was to give all organized religion "the finger." To begin with, I actually let go of any true devotion. I stopped reading scriptures, praying, and having reverence toward anything spiritual even though I still went to church and fulfilled my callings. But I was only going through the motions. Inwardly I often felt angry and hurt. Sometimes I would mock things at church or in the temple. I felt that since the "one true church" was no longer what it said it was, there must be nothing else. I decided I could be outwardly a Mormon but inwardly an atheist.

JEFF: An atheist or an agnostic?

BRETT: Probably a little of each. I have since developed a belief in a "higher being" or "higher power" that governs in some way.

JEFF: Have you sought out any other help since coming out to Mandy, your brother, and your two friends?

BRETT: I have started seeing a non-LDS therapist who has been very supportive. He isn't trying to coax me away from

Mormonism; in fact, recently he encouraged me to cling to my faith since he saw how much it had meant to me in the past. In my most recent session, I was talking about all the garbage that drove me crazy at church, and when I finished he asked, "Is there anything you *like* about your religion?" I stopped talking, started thinking, became emotional, and began reflecting on how the gospel encourages people to become better individuals, take good care of their families, and serve each other. His question was just what I needed to break out of my negativity. My perspective has changed a lot, at least for now.

JEFF: You are fortunate to still see and appreciate the "good" in the Church. That kind of attitude can help Borderlanders be successful and stay with the Church. What else have you found to be helpful?

BRETT: I have been making attempts to fill my spiritual vacuum by doing things like listen to the early Mormon Stories podcasts—I love them!—and praying on a regular basis. I actually watched general conference and actively tried to glean something positive from it. I saw Elder Holland's talk as the closest the Church has come to addressing the faith/doubt issue.

JEFF: Yes, I was truly amazed with Elder Holland's talk. Actually, I have to give credit to the general authorities; they know a lot more than we sometimes think. But I wonder why they hold things back for so long. If something like Elder Holland's talk had been given twenty years ago, I think we could have saved a lot of time and trouble.

BRETT: I actually started to read from the Bible last night because I *wanted* to. It was the first time I have gone to the scriptures for solace in years. I'm starting to experience a greater sense of peace. I still have questions and doubts, but having that peaceful feeling is worth so much more than trying to solve unexplainable mysteries.

Interestingly, I am also finding out that this spiritual peace is in no way pro-

hibiting me from reading and listening more about the issues that were so troublesome to me seven years ago. I don't want to stop participating in the quest for truth and knowledge. I'm trying to put my new knowledge into perspective. I'm learning to say that I'm not sure about many things but still be content.

JEFF: If only more people were willing to say to others in their wards, "I'm not sure about . . ." But too many of us feel compelled to pretend we know and agree with everything, or we feel compelled to keep our mouths shut. Simply being able to acknowledge uncertainty is a real step forward.

By the way, have you encountered any other Borderlanders at church or work?

BRETT: About two weeks ago I began praying for comfort and a few days later I cautiously mentioned a few of my "no sures" to a ward member I have known for a while. I discovered that he shared many of them. It was amazing! He hasn't told his wife about his concerns yet and was really curious to know how Mandy had reacted. His wife and Mandy are kind of cut from the same cloth. He has worked with me in callings in the past, so this new bond has been great, especially since he is someone I've looked up to for years as a model father, husband, and insightful member.

JEFF: I've had many of those "chance encounters" as well, as have many Borderlanders. It is a blessing to have someone you can talk honestly with.

BRETT: [several weeks later] Just reporting in to say that I have encountered no new significant "problems." I still have my good days and bad days; but most are good. Focusing on the positive and realizing what some alternatives would have cost me have helped. I'm not saying that staying with the Church is the best answer for everyone, though. I'd be more than happy to email or chat with anyone else you find who is going through this. *Any takers? Send me an email and I'll forward it to "Brett."* 📧

NOTES

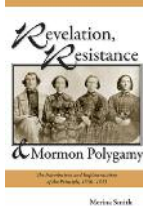
1. The first part of this story was published in SUNSTONE 171, column number 47. In the very first column (this is Column 48), I introduced the borderland member as one who may have an unusual but LDS-compatible outlook on life, a dis-

tinctive 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.

2. My book, *For those Who Wonder*, contains several chapters on managing borderland issues and problems. It is a free download at: www.forthosewhowonder.com. My email address is jeff@eburton.com.

Review

Revelation, Resistance & Mormon Polygamy: The Introduction and Implementation of the Principle, 1830–1853, Merina Smith (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2013).



Reviewed by *George D. Smith*

WITH THIS BOOK, Merina Smith, a graduate of the University of Colorado with a Ph.D. from the University of California at San Diego, has synthesized research from a range of historians to present an accurate and colorful view of the beginnings of Mormon polygamy from 1830–1853, bringing together much of the work of Lawrence Foster, Richard Van Wagoner, Todd Compton, Gary Bergera, Richard Bushman, and my own *Nauvoo Polygamy*.

Merina Smith introduces her book with Joseph Smith's *revelatory narrative* of an afterlife family redefined by the polygamous writings of early biblical patriarchs, even managing to use the Book of Mormon's condemnation of polygamy toward this end.

But she also documents the *resistance* he (and others in the Church hierarchy) faced from many women (some of them still in their early teens) when asked to become plural spouses. Joseph Smith himself married girls as young as age 14, and within the polygamous families begun in the Nauvoo settlement, one of the author's sources records a 12-year-old wife, four 13-year-olds, twenty-one 14-year-olds, and thirty 15-year-olds, to total fifty-six wives under 16 years old.

Independent-minded women challenged the idea of polygamy from the outset, and now that this erstwhile practice has been banned in the LDS community (except for in some independent communities that continue to believe the polygamous *narrative*) and by the American government; the practice has been mostly forgotten in twenty-first century LDS teaching manuals.

The story of early Mormon polygamy often reads like a soap opera, from Joseph Smith's barnyard romance with Fanny Alger in Kirtland, to his first failed proposals to Zina and Presendia Huntington, to his first plural marriage to Louisa Beaman (performed 5 April 1841). The author does overlook a curious dimension to these three plural courtships in 1841: after having been turned down by Zina and Presendia Huntington, and within about a month after his first plural marriage, Joseph and Emma conceived an unnamed son. By the time of the baby's birth on 7 February 1842 (he died immediately), Joseph had married Zina and Presendia Huntington (by then both married women), as well as his deceased brother's widow, Agnes Coolbrith (Smith). It would be interesting if future historians turned more attention to this period from 1841 to 1844, doubtless rife with both comedy and tragedy as pregnancies, courtships, and marriages multiplied.

A curious bias that seems to peek through from time to time is Merinda Smith's uneven judgment of some of the people involved. For example, although it seems apparent that Joseph Smith and John C. Bennett both participated in the leadership of the growing church community in Nauvoo—Bennett was Smith's candidate for

Nauvoo mayor, Assistant President of the Church, and the subject of a revelation (D&C 124:16-17)—the author dubs Bennett “an out and out lecher.” Meanwhile, Joseph Smith goes on to marry thirty to forty women (up to fourteen of them already having husbands and homes) but escapes a similar judgment. Indeed, it seems that sometimes the author writes as though it were the fault of historical researchers that Smith “went on to marry many wives” (p. 104), subtly blunting Joseph Smith's ownership of his many marital decisions. Similarly, the women who allowed themselves to engage the attentions of this married man with a family and a church to manage (making Emma's life miserable in the process) escape the author's condemnation.

The author identifies some important facts, such as that after 1841 when Brigham Young and Heber Kimball finished their travels throughout America and England, they went on “no extended foreign missions—a good thing for their burgeoning families” (p. 99). In later years these two men eventually married “over a hundred women.”

Merina Smith has composed a thorough and fast-moving account of Mormon polygamy in the Nauvoo community, which focuses “primarily on the secret phase of Nauvoo polygamy” from 1841–1844. This is a valuable and readable description of a key aspect of westward-moving American history. Perhaps she will continue her focus on in-depth analyses of some of the many dramas within this Nauvoo community and how they developed after the Saints brought this secret practice out in the open in their new home in the west. ☞