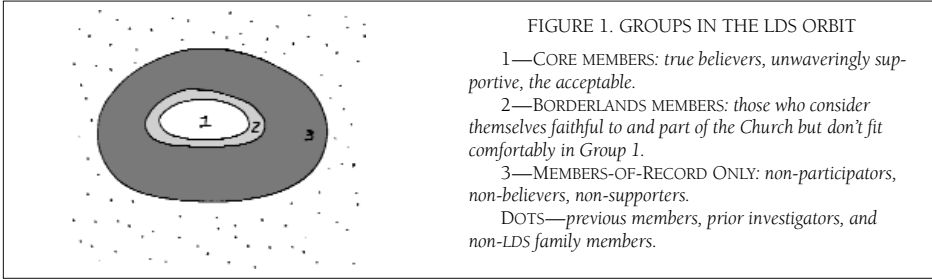


TRAITS OF THE SUCCESSFUL BORDERLANDER

by D. Jeff Burton



IT HAS BECOME generally known that a large percentage of baptized Mormons worldwide eventually slip into inactivity, leave the Church, or are excommunicated. Many sojourn in the Borderlands of the Church for a time and then move on. But a few decide to stay in the Borderlands for various reasons: family, job, fear, love, habit, hope, friends, neighbors, and so forth. Many of those “stayers” have actually made their experience useful, successful, even fun.

Over the years, I have noticed that successful Borderland members seem to share several distinctive traits, attitudes, and behaviors.¹ “Successful” in this sense means staying with the Church at some level, being at peace with their situation (perhaps even enjoying it), and making the situation work for themselves and others.

For a presentation at the August 2011 Sunstone Symposium, I compiled a checklist of twelve “traits of the successful Borderland member.”² For this article, I have expanded each “trait” with the experiences and suggestions of successful Borderlanders. At the end of my discussion of each item, I have listed previous columns that expand on the trait and its applications in the lives of real people.³

1. *I try to be honest with myself and seek out the sources of my motivations.*

Only when we are honest with ourselves can we make intelligent and loving deci-

sions that benefit ourselves and our families. Find a time when you can be most candid with yourself, perhaps while alone in your bedroom, and ask yourself, “Why do I stay?” Or, “Why *should* I stay (or go)?” Obvious reasons will surface first, but look deeper for the hidden ones. Give this process time—it may take a few weeks or months. Ask your spouse, friends, or a counselor to help you. And write down your findings.

As you contemplate this list, ask yourself, “Are my reasons to stay or leave worthy? What alternatives do I have? What effects would stem from my decisions? In what ways can I be open and honest about this? What compromises am I willing to make in order to be both honest and a stayer? (Columns 15, 28, 33, 38.)

2. *I recognize that I may be suffering a “loss” and am therefore sensitive to and trying to manage the emotions around that loss.*

Although it may not seem so at first, almost all Borderland members have “lost” something: a testimony, expectations of receiving a testimony, a comfortable world view, a sense of certainty or assurance, expectations of a perfected eternal family, expectations of taking on a leadership role such as bishop or Relief Society president. You might be experiencing one or more of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross’s famous five steps to recovery from loss: denial, anger, depression, bargaining, and acceptance. Just

knowing that these feelings are likely can help you deal with the loss and avoid hurting yourself and others. (Columns 2, 3, 6, 25)

3. *I seek outside help when necessary and useful.*

All successful Borderland members I’ve met have admitted that they can’t do it by themselves. They need help from God, spouses, family members, friends, and, sometimes, professional counselors. Finding a good talking companion is important. But some LDS people who have never experienced the Borderlands are not ready to listen and perhaps won’t even know what you’re talking about. . It is best to find objective, understanding, non-judgmental people. Talking, especially with those who have been through the Borderlands, will help you find the needed answers. (Columns 9, 10, 23.)

4. *I am developing a personal religion that is compatible with the LDS model.*

It seems to me that whether a true believer, a Borderland member, or a member of another faith, we all are building personal relationships with God. Paul’s letter to Philippians says that we are each “working out our own salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil. 2:12).

One way to determine the compatibility of your personal religion with Mormonism is to make three lists: the first denoting the Church’s requirements for its members; the second detailing Jesus’ requirements of us; and the third listing your requirements for yourself. Look for any overlap and agreement among items in the lists. Look for ways to adjust and accommodate. For example, where the Church may seem to require “testimony,” make an adjustment to “faith.” Where the Church requires you to attend the temple, you might substitute genealogical research or another worthy service.

It might even be possible to ignore the items you disagree with in your list of Church requirements. Successful Borderland members muster up enough flexibility or find enough overlap to make it possible for them to stay with the Church. (Columns 8, 34.)

5. *I am becoming a “participating student” of Mormonism and/or detaching myself emotionally from things that bother me.*

Borderlanders often become, or regard

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themselves as, “students” of Mormonism. They try to study their religion objectively. They observe pros and cons in a detached way, thus avoiding the anger, resentment, frustration, and emotional upheavals they used to feel. One young Borderland member wisely told me, “Wow, I didn’t know that Joseph Smith had some young wives! Isn’t that interesting? I want to learn more. And I’m not going to get too emotionally involved. It’s too hard on me.”

If you get dismayed or angry at the things you learn, go back to Item 2 and use those techniques to manage your anger and loss. Ask yourself, for example, “What are the sources of this anger I feel that Joseph Smith married all those wives?” This tactic can buy you time to understand yourself.

Some of us use these same techniques with politics or sports. “Even though BYU is winning/losing, I’m going to concentrate on the technical points of the game so that I don’t get too upset.” “Isn’t it interesting how Mitt Romney is handling the accusations that he is a flip-flopper and fibber?” We can deal with many religious issues in a similarly detached manner. (Columns 8, 33.)

6. *I “study things out in my mind” and take plenty of time to make decisions about my Mormonism.*

The well-known instructions given to Oliver Cowdery in D&C 9, about how to translate from the golden plates, teach us that the heart must be involved in receiving revelation. At the same time, it is important to note that D&C 9:8 tells Oliver to first “study it out in your mind.” Studying is not a passive activity. It means using your education and your intelligence to approach an issue. The process of gathering data and studying them takes time, but be patient. Time heals; it brings perspective; it helps us make better choices.

Those who don’t take time to study before making important decisions often jump off a cliff, much to the dismay of friends, family, and eventually themselves. (Columns 8, 10, 17, 22, 39.)

7. *I use compromise to solve problems related to my Borderland status.*

When I was a young man past the normal missionary age, my friends already serving missions, my bishop called me in to discuss the matter. I told him of my Borderland status (although I didn’t call it that at the time), but that didn’t deter him

from his mission to get me on a mission.

“Look,” he said, “What do you think about sharing Christ’s teachings with others?”

“That’s sounds okay,” I said, wondering what he had in mind.

“Okay,” he responded, “we’ll get you a mission to Japan. You can teach the Japanese about Jesus.”

And off I went. I was able to invest myself in my mission because I felt that Christianity was a good thing to share, but I never had to bear testimony that Mormonism was the one and only true church. Impossible as it might seem, I shared in sixty baptisms, acted as a branch president, and served as a “traveling elder.” My mission experience taught me to find compromises and solutions to my situation as a Borderlander. (Column 38.)

8. *I keep up my sense of humor about my Borderland issues.*

The Borderlands often seem a very serious place, not be taken lightly. But it helps to look for the humor, irony, and paradoxes in our situation. In my new satirical novel, *Eternal Borderlands*,⁴ Candice, a Borderland spirit in the preexistence, makes an observation about “War in Heaven” folklore.

Why in the name of Kolob did they put the most important decision in all creation up for a vote? What if two-thirds of the Host of Heaven had gone for Lucifer’s plan? Yikes! And why did one third of all our brothers and sisters (billions of them) fail to go along with the Heavenly Council’s recommendations? They always sustained their rulings and decrees in the past. And why is it that just one poor decision, one mistake, has such an eternally damning consequence for so many? How come they can’t have the principle of repentance applied to them? And what about all the progress they made during those thousands of millennia of study and preparation during our preexistence? Poof, gone. Any high school that threw out one third of its seniors on the eve of graduation on the basis of a single test would be considered an unfair institution indeed! Then, what about the mothers of all

those who have been eternally lost? It must be devastating to our beloved Mothers in Heaven to have lost, on average, one third of their children to an eternally burning pit of fire. And, finally, just what is the difference between what we have here in the preexistence (no tempters, no temptation, no sin) and Lucifer’s plan? It may have seemed to be simply a continuation of the status quo. Maybe that is why so many went for Brother Lucifer’s approach? Then again, maybe not. I guess I just don’t understand it all.

Paradox, irony, and humor can often alleviate the pain and help us put our “serious” issues in perspective. Humor helps us realize that many questions don’t have a single, simple answer. And maybe we’ll never know, or aren’t meant to know.

One good way to keep your sense of humor about your situation is to read Robert Kirby’s religion column in the *Salt Lake Tribune* on Saturdays. He’s the ultimate LDS Borderland member. His Saturday columns almost always convey a funny side of Mormonism that can make us all chuckle at our situations.

9. *I look for the good in my Borderland situation.*

Admittedly, this may take some effort to begin with. But I promise you’ll dig up quite a list if you try. A few positives of citizenship in Borderlandia I’ve heard include: “It’s good to have the freedom to think for myself and be responsible for myself.” “Suddenly, curiosity is okay.” “The pressure to perform and pretend that I’m someone I’m not is gone.” “I’m making new friends outside the ward.” “Now I can do other kinds of service.” “I have fewer feelings of guilt.” “Now when I don’t want to go to the ward picnic, I just don’t go.” “I’ve become more interested in studying what Jesus taught about living well.” “It feels good to be honest about my beliefs.” (Columns 11, 33.)

10. *I am honest, but tactful, with others.*

Being honest in some situations at church is difficult. We would all agree that telling blatant lies, such as professing a belief in a principle you don’t have a testimony of, is dishonest. But what about

silence? (“I just won’t say anything, and everyone will think I have a testimony.”) And sometimes honesty, when dealt out brutally, can be destructive. (“You think you know Joseph Smith? Well, here are a few facts I’ve learned recently . . .”) Most true believers don’t have a system to deal constructively with difficult “facts.” Try to remember when you were just like them. Don’t hurt others. It goes against what Jesus taught us. (Columns 15, 28.)

11. *I put my family and spouse first in my decisions and actions. My love for them governs my behaviors and attitudes.*

Family relationships are truly important. I believe they should take precedence over concerns about religious history and dogma.

A young woman once told me that her fiancé (it was a second marriage for both of them) wanted them to be married in the temple. Although she was worthy to obtain a temple recommend, she didn’t really believe the temple experience was of God and thought it would be hypocritical to participate in the temple experience. We talked,

and finally she concluded that there are a lot of reasons to go to the temple, some good, some not so good. But a good enough reason was to show her love, respect, and support of her fiancé and their coming marriage. He knew of her reservations, and he wasn’t trying to change her mind—it was just an important part of his life and expectations. Her decision to sacrifice her private reservations for their relationship had a positive impact on their marriage. (Columns 38, 39.)

12. *I let others live their religious lives as they see fit. I don’t try to “convert” others to my way of thinking.*

As noted above in item 4, we each have our own approach to our relationship with

*Please send me your
experiences from life
in the Borderlands.*

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deity. We don’t know how or even if we will be divinely judged. So we should be tolerant. If you would like your beliefs to be accepted, give others the same room. If you must interfere with others’ thinking, do so by being a constructive example of a Borderlander. (Columns 2, 6.)

NOTES

1. In my first column, 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. A recording of the session is downloadable at SL11122. This column may be a bit repetitive to some long-term readers because it is a summary of many people’s stories, but I hope that it will help recent subscribers.

3. Copies of previous columns are available for free download at www.forthosewhowonder.com.

4. *Eternal Borderlands: Detours along the Road to Celestial Glory* is available from Benchmark Books, other LDS Bookstores, and AMAZON.COM. ISBN 1-883992-45-1.