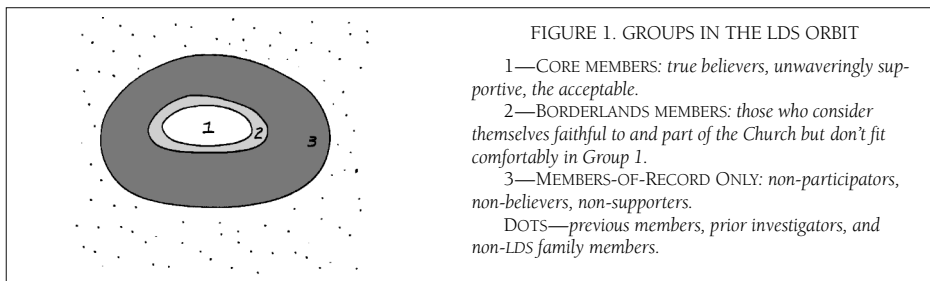


BRAVING THE BORDERLANDS . . .

MISCELLANEOUS NEWS
AND INTERESTING ITEMS

by D. Jeff Burton



SLC SUMMER SYMPOSIUM

ON 27 JULY 2012, at session 253 of the Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium, “Family Values: Coping with a Borderland¹ Family Member,” I was joined by John Dehlin, Lilly Shults, Adam Fisher, and Suzann Werner in a panel responding to questions and comments from the audience. We received a number of important and interesting questions, including:

- How can I help my wife see that the Borderlands is not a wicked place? She thinks I'm involved in pure evil.
- How can staying in the borderlands [as a closet doubter] be anything but living a lie?
- How do we question authority without challenging it?
- How can I help my angry children cope with my borderland issues? They think there is no room in the Church for someone like me.”

The panel provided useful and insightful answers to these and many other questions. A podcast of the entire session is available on Sunstone's website.²

At the session, I distributed a short questionnaire, and about twenty-five returned the completed form. Of those responding, 70% were male and 30%, female. Their ages ranged from 23 to 78 with the average being

about 50. The major reasons people reported for being in the borderlands were:

- Testimony issues, 80%
- Sexual orientation, 20%
- Other issues, 30%

Eighty percent reported they were “in the closet” about their issues. Eighty-five percent reported that their borderland status had caused relationship difficulties with family members, the seriousness of the trouble averaging 7 on a scale of 1–10, where ten is the most severe. These difficulties covered the entire spectrum from simple domestic arguments to divorce and total family estrangement. Respondents reported that their problems had been going on for an average of 13 years. Only 7% reported that their relationship difficulties had been completely resolved; another 30% said their difficulties had been mostly resolved; but 63% said their difficulties had not been resolved at all. Those who reported total or partial resolution suggested that professional counseling, good communication skills, and simple tact were most helpful in resolving their family difficulties. Obviously, we have not made much progress on narrowing the borderlands or solving problems facing these borderlanders.

RECENT EMAIL EXCHANGE

Jane (not her real name) and I recently had the following email exchange.

JANE: I made an earnest goal a couple of years ago to strengthen my testimony of Joseph Smith by learning more about him and Church history. My study instead introduced me to doubts and confusion, which have led me through the various emotional phases you describe in your book.³ Right now, I seem to be stuck in the “depression phase” of this process. Do you have any thoughts?

JEFF: I'm glad the book has been useful to you. Unfortunately, the losses you sustain as you enter the borderlands can definitely leave you feeling depressed. Those feelings may last a while, but I can promise you that they will eventually pass as you find new experiences, expectations, and goals to fill the holes left by the departure of your testimony. Patience, acceptance, and a re-ordering your life can usually move you into a happier mood. Just remember to include the needs of your family in your planning and actions.

You will likely need to talk with someone about your issues. I usually suggest that new borderlanders start with trusted friends or, in some cases, their bishops.

Reading about others' experiences can also be helpful. Their stories may show you a way to move forward, or give you hope that “this, too, will pass.” Have you read my other Borderland columns? They have many stories of people who have gone through similar experiences. Attending a Sunstone Symposium or Mormon Stories conference to meet people of like mind can also be quite useful.

Writing your experiences down might help. You could write a history or keep a daily journal. Such exercises can help crystallize your thinking. You may begin to see more clearly what your motivations, thoughts, and desires are, and where they may be leading you. I've attached here a questionnaire that many people have found helpful. Filling it out and studying it may give you some insight. You might send it to me or trusted others for their responses.

JANE: Ironically, though I enjoy writing, I haven't made any record of my feelings or journey—mostly because that would mean admitting my state of confusion. But it's time, and I agree it could be healing and cathartic.

And, you are right; I have found comfort in the Sunstone community, listening to several of the symposium sessions online. I am glad to have discovered people going through similar experiences. I will continue to im-

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merse myself in this community, and I will definitely read your Borderlands column.

My particular situation is complicated by the fact that I am employed by [an LDS Church school]. So I don't have a division between my profession and my religion—and my job depends on me having a temple recommend. This makes me very hesitant to talk with my bishop about my concerns. If he doesn't provide my bi-annual endorsement, I will lose my job. And so I confide primarily in my husband and one or two like-minded friends. I am grateful to have them. One of them says she feels like she was called on a mission to the borderlands, and it sounds like you may have been, too.

JEFF: Sounds like you're on the right track with your emotional issues. Having a trusted friend to talk with is quite a blessing.

As for your Church employment, I wouldn't rock the boat too much. It is the Church's own policy to "keep unorthodox beliefs to yourself," so they can't really fault you for not sharing your current thoughts, beliefs, and doubts with everyone. When the time is right, the appropriate road will appear out of the mists and you can take it when you're ready.

TEENAGE BORDERLANDERS

I received the following two interesting email responses to column 43 which discussed the phenomenon of teenage borderlanders and how we might encourage them to be more open and honest about their true beliefs, thoughts, and feelings. The responders' names are changed and some details are modified to protect their identities.

JACKIE: I became a borderlander as a teenager because my father, influenced by

anti-Mormon literature, chose to behave like an atheist. He felt it was his duty to enlighten my siblings and me, so he gave us books like *No Man Knows My History* to read when we were teenagers. I found the book disturbing and could not accept it outright. I argued with Dad about it and asked questions at church, where I was told it was "an evil book." I wasn't sure who to believe. I was frustrated by dad's views and decided to cling as tenaciously to my meager belief as he did to his doubt. I longed to have an ideal Mormon family, all of us attending church together and having family prayer. People in our ward might have been nervous if they would have known how carefully I watched them to see if the Mormon ideal was real. Because we lived in a small southern Idaho town, dad told us to keep going to church so that we wouldn't become social outcasts. At home, Dad would tell us what was "wrong" with our religion, and at church we would be taught the traditional lessons.

When I started high school, I attended Seminary, which was almost part of the curriculum in our mostly Mormon town. I decided that I no longer wanted to struggle with the disparity between my dad's beliefs and the Church's teachings. I didn't talk about my issues with anyone. Instead, I started into a several-month regimen of fasting and prayer, hoping that it would help me find the truth.

One day, our high school principal died suddenly of a stroke. His daughter was a friend of mine. School was dismissed for the funeral, and some friends and I found seats halfway back in the crowded hall. I was listening to the music and the speakers, thinking about my friend losing her father, death, and the hereafter when I heard someone whisper in my ear. I glanced

around to see who had spoken. No one was looking at me, and no one was even sitting near enough to have done it. Puzzled, I thought it must have been my imagination, but then the voice came again very clearly, "You must find out for yourself."

A moment later, a white fire—a feeling of being flooded with light—washed over me and I assumed it was a witness of the Spirit—"the burning in the bosom" described in the scriptures. The experience was brief, and, as far as I could tell, unnoticed by anyone around me. I had not anticipated receiving a feeling so profound, nor did I know what to make of the words I had heard. How did they make any difference? I had to mature for a few years before I could look back and realize that the answer was a powerful affirmation of my agency.

LDS youth are often taught that such an experience signals the end of the story. Questions cease and, knowing the truth, you live happily ever after. But for me, what it did was justify further questioning. I had been given permission to keep searching, and that is what I did. For many years now, I have felt that my calling is to stay with the Church and try to help others who are struggling with testimony issues. I also push for change within the system.

During college, I married a liberal Mormon convert and we had four children together. Although we were both in the borderlands, we stayed active in our ward and took our children to church regularly.

But we were also open with our children, teaching them about the problematic parts of the Church from an early age so they wouldn't be shocked later on. We read scriptures and Church history together and discussed current events such as the issue of blacks and the priesthood. We also studied other religions. We always tried to em-

 **Poncius' Puddle**



phasize that they should strive to access the Spirit when wrestling with these issues. When my children were older, my father added his ideas to the pot. And, since we lived near my husband's non-member parents, our children learned tolerance and acceptance. We also helped them work through eye-rolling incidents such as when one of our son's Seminary teachers, while talking about evolution, referred to "scientists and other atheists." (My husband is a scientist.)

Our oldest two kids went to BYU and were involved with the *Student Review*, a popular underground campus newspaper. Both chose to serve missions. After our oldest son married, he and his wife became inactive but they teach their three children enough about their Mormon heritage that the kids feel they are a part of it even though they are not baptized. They hold family home evenings to learn about Mormonism and other religions, and they have family prayer regularly. They are giving their children a strong foundation to make their own choices later on.

Another son went to college in California, served a mission in Idaho, married in the temple and has remained active. Like his father, he is appreciated in the ward but is probably considered too liberal to be called to high positions.

Our youngest daughter struggled with faith from a young age. She wanted to visit other churches and we supported her spiritual quest, taking her to various services and frequently engaging in discussion about scripture and religion. She did not stay active but still feels culturally Mormon and bears no antagonism towards the Church. All of our children (spouses included) are open-minded and service-oriented. We enjoy a close family relationship.

TOM: All of us have experienced, to lesser or greater degrees, mental programming from the beginning of life. We learn to look to parents, siblings, books, teachers, leaders, speakers, and media for guidance on how to think, how to act, how to look, how to feel, and—sadly—how to express ourselves. To me it's one of life's great tragedies that so many people never find a personal voice, a mode of self expression, never tap into the deepest recesses of their souls for answers to questions about personal purpose. No wonder our children can't be honest and open about what they think and feel, they don't trust themselves to have an answer acceptable to their families or LDS culture. Real expression of true feelings and

beliefs come when a person feels safe enough to be completely honest, when they don't feel pressured to meet other people's agendas, scripts, or opinions, when they trust that what comes into their minds and hearts is valid and valuable. Maybe it's time we allowed self expression from our youth, starting by honoring their ability to know what is right for themselves. (And it would help if adults honored that ability in themselves, as well.)

MORMONISM FOR BORDERLANDERS

I received the following email response from "Robert" for Column 44 which explored Alain de Botton's book, *Religion for Atheists: A Non-believer's Guide to the Uses of Religion*. The responder's name has been changed.

ROBERT: By setting the "true or not?" debate aside, de Botton says we can look at the good ideas religions offer. This may be true for most religions, but it may be difficult for Mormons to accept. Since our church claims not only to be true, but to be the *only* true church, invalidating that claim alone threatens to invalidate the entire thing. Plus, we do all have to deal with our friends and neighbors who claim not just that they believe, not just that they think, but that they *know* of the Church's truthfulness. This attitude can push the borderlander into a corner. I have found that my dearest friends, and even my own bishop, have much sympathy and understanding regarding my borderlander status. Nevertheless, even those who acknowledge their own difficulties with aspects of the creed seem to continue to participate in the illusion of a church with a monolithic set of beliefs. Just once, I'd like to hear a testimony where the speaker claims only a 75% belief in this, and a 50% belief in that. Maybe I'll have to be the one who starts the trend.

JEFF: Anyone else game to give this approach a try? Using the word "believe" is certainly acceptable: "I don't know for sure, but I believe that the Church is on the right

Please send me your experiences from life in the Borderlands.

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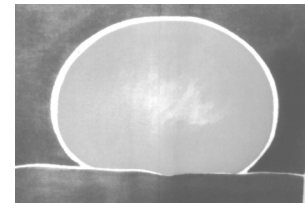
track and I'm going to support it." Being tentative is acceptable: "I'm not absolutely sure, but it seems to me that God has answered my prayers. I'm happy assuming he has." These approaches work well in temple recommend interviews, as well. ☺

NOTES

1. In my first column (this is Column 45), 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.

2. Find this session at https://www.sunstonemagazine.com/blog/?page=ss_audio-for-year-2012

3. My book, *For Those Who Wonder*, contains several chapters on managing borderland issues and problems. It is a free download at www.forthosewhowonder.com.



BEFORE LANGUAGE

Up from the fountain
the babble of children,
drenched with surprise. Alive!
The rain of their syllables
does not strain to speech,
their glottal whoops and yells
never jell to full-fledged
words or phrases.

Parents hover bird-like
by their brood. Parents fan
and fan their little flames.
And I, alone, the childless one,
sit purposeless, yet not in vain.
Before language was, the rain
Children's voices pouring
from the sky. I close my eyes
and let it wash my dust.

RICHARD SCHIFFMAN