

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES IN THE BORDERLANDS—II

By D. Jeff Burton

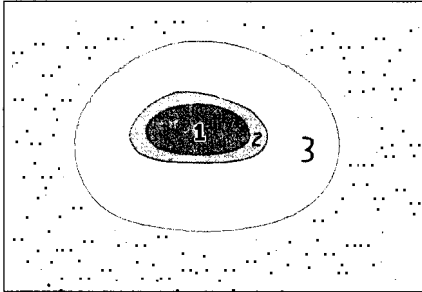


FIGURE 1. GROUPS IN THE LDS ORBIT
 1—CORE MEMBERS: true believers, unwaveringly supportive, the acceptable.
 2—BORDERLANDS MEMBERS: those who consider themselves faithful to and part of the Church but don't fit comfortably in Group 1.
 3—MEMBERS-OF-RECORD ONLY: non-participants, non-believers, non-supporters.
 DOTS—previous members, prior investigators, and non-LDS family members.

I feel like I am in this horrendous trap that I can't get out of. I just pray, pray, and pray! Recently I have been on [some websites] that have literally blown my mind to the point I have been in constant prayer to keep from losing it.

THIS POIGNANT STATEMENT was part of an email from “Jessica” (not her real name), a long-term and much-troubled Borderlander.¹ You can think of Jessica as a mature housewife living in Utah County and married in the temple to a staunch Group 1 true believer. Jessica is the mother of four grown children and a convert to the Church during her teenage years.

In this column, we explore the stories of Borderlanders because it is useful to know how others have successfully (or unsuccessfully) dealt with problems. In my last column, I talked about my own lifelong experience in the Borderlands—which I consider to be successful and comfortable.

Those who enter the Borderlands either become short-term visitors (staying for weeks or months before returning to Group 1 or, more commonly, moving on to Group 3 status), or they stay for many years. Those who stay either eventually establish a warm and comfortable home (like I have) or become troubled wanderers (like Jessica).

Long-term Borderland occupants include (1) members who appreciate the Church and religion and who hope to receive a testimony, (2) faithful members who support the Church but are not overly concerned about “getting a testimony” (this is where I fit in), (3) spouses

of true believers who, to avoid disrupting their families, can't or won't leave (Jessica's situation), (4) troubled Church employees (who can't give up job and retirement benefits), (5) members who have had a “lost-my-testimony” experience and in their frustration and anguish just don't know what to do, (6) those who can't leave the group because they feel closely attached to their ward members and friends. A troubled few linger for years, enduring painful emotional problems, unable to return to Group 1, move on, or make a comfortable home in the Borderlands. Jessica is one of these unfortunate souls.

I have distilled Jessica's and my many communications over the past six months into the following interactive paragraphs. Some details have been modified to protect the confidentiality and identities of the people involved.

JEFF: How did you come to find yourself in the Borderlands?

JESSICA: *During my teenage years, I lived summers with my aunt who was LDS. One thing led to another, and I was baptized into the Church. (Ironically, a few years after I married into it, my aunt left the Church!) Then came BYU and marriage. I was twenty-three when I attended my first temple ceremony, which horrified me and left me with little desire to ever go back. That was my first experience of questioning, doubting, and feeling separated from others—this, more than thirty years ago. In recent years, many other troubling issues have popped up: polygamy viewed as the law of heaven and the order of the celestial kingdom; the subsequent dehumanizing, emotional abuse of women; and many other things.*

[Jessica then details many of her concerns, citing the typical complaints and concerns one finds on LDS-related internet sites, e.g., about God having sex with Mary, Joseph Smith and others marrying teenage girls, blood atonement, and Adam/God.]

JEFF: We really don't know the full facts about [such] complaints and claims, which are variously and widely repeated with little or questionable proof. Take all such writings and claims with a grain of salt.

Here are my suggestions for struggling members of the Borderlands like you:

- Compartmentalize your testimony. Separate the “testable” from the “non-testable,” for example. Or separate your testimony into logical categories: “What I believe.” “What I don't know.” “What I don't believe yet.” “What I don't believe.”

- Give yourself credit for the “testimony” you do have, e.g., the validity of prayer and honesty, the benefits of living a Christian life, and so forth.

- Avoid becoming an easy “true believer” in anti-Mormon literature and claims.

- Become a pure seeker of knowledge and understanding; if you can't be a “true believer,” try becoming a detached but participating student of Mormonism; become an active but objective observer of our religion. (From an objective standpoint, it actually looks pretty good.)

- Work on your personal relationships with God, Jesus, family, and friends; let the Church and Mormonism be as much a part of your religious life as you can.²

- Devote yourself to the people/behavior part of the LDS equation—honesty, kindness, unselfishness, sharing, love, doing good for others. (Isn't this the core of Christ's teachings, after all?)

- Don't let your troubles and concerns destroy important relationships, such as those with your husband and children.

- Accept the fact that all people have a “personal religion” that is unique to them; try to accept people around you as they are; try to accept and understand that your husband is on a different but parallel path to salvation. Accepting others usually results in being accepted, too.

JESSICA [A week later.]: *Thanks for the tips. I have not visited any more of those anti-Mormon Internet sites. Can't handle it. (Still, I cannot get “blood atonement” out of my mind.) But those horrific accounts regarding the abuses of polygamy, and murder, and other stuff are taken from the Journal of Discourses, the Deseret News, and various journals, not just conjured up in someone's head. How can truth be built on such corruptions? Did those frenzied*

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frontier "prophets" just go crazy with power, real or imagined?

JEFF: Who knows? I don't dwell on such issues since they don't impact my daily life nor my personal relationships in any meaningful way.

JESSICA: I [recently read] the conference talk by Jeffrey Holland, "A Prayer for the Children," that essentially repudiates any kind of skepticism, calling negative attention to "those who pitch their tents out on the periphery of religious faith" (as though, if you don't embrace Mormonism, per se, then you have no faith at all). It further illuminates the "price to be paid" down the line—children, their children, etc.—if we don't "convey powerful, heartfelt convictions regarding the truthfulness of the Restoration and the divine guidance of the Church from the First Vision to this very hour." If you don't have that conviction (and that seems incomprehensible to true believers), you can't be a hypocrite and try to convey what you don't believe! What do you say about that? The balancing act I have had to do at home is absolutely draining, mentally and emotionally. I would not wish it on anyone.

JEFF: Elder Holland's talk left me with a few questions, too. Obviously he was talking to true believers who might not fully share their testimonies with their kids (or who might live like they don't have a testimony). I'm not sure how he would treat those who have not yet received or don't have the gift of "knowing"—people like us, who are willing to be faithful members of the Church without that strong "testimony." I have written to him to ask him how his instruction applies in this case.³

JESSICA: As it relates to my husband, the best and only course I can take is not to talk about religion at all. I'm sure you know the type. He's really shaken by my questioning and all. Thinks the devil's got me. And our love for each other has suffered. Mine more than his, probably.

JEFF: Maybe it is best to wait for the right time to talk to him, i.e., after he trusts you a little more.

JESSICA: From your experience, do you have a formula for helping couples cope with such strong religious polarization?

JEFF: I wish there were a formula, but every couple's situation is different. Have you considered couples counseling? You both need to return to your ultimate intentions

and commitments to each other. What you both must be willing to say (and act, and do, and be) is: "Our relationship is the most important thing in my life." "You (the spouse) are the most important person in my life." "All other facets of life, while important and useful, will assume a secondary role, including the Church." Note that I didn't say "including my personal relationship to God," which is integral to each person's life. It tends to transcend all facets of life. The Church is here to help us meet our prime spiritual goals, commitments, and intentions. It is an institution intended, in part, to help sustain our personal quest for happiness and salvation and to aid us in maintaining a good relationship with our Father in Heaven. The Church also has several of its own divinely mandated goals which it strongly encourages us to participate in: saving the dead, perfecting the saints, preaching the gospel to others. These are worthy Church goals and warrant our support, as we can give it.

JESSICA: There is such an oppressive, heavy cloud hanging in the air at home. My husband has mellowed somewhat, but at times he can't resist jabs like, "If you can't accept [Church-related teachings], then just leave," and stuff like that. I just want to do a primal scream! I am sending you an article written by Robert Kirby a while back, "Thou Shalt Not Coerce Thy Spouse."⁴ I have loved his column ever since moving here.

JEFF: Did your husband read that article? Sometimes humor can defuse even the most difficult of problems.

JESSICA: My husband switched from the Tribune to the Deseret News now that it is a morning paper. God forbid you should get another viewpoint!

JEFF: How about taking both papers? There is always an acceptable compromise if both partners in a relationship are willing to look for it.

JESSICA: As for "leaving," family, fear, and economic suicide keep me from going. I recognize that one of my weaknesses is deeming myself powerless. My problem is not having a career and being able to support myself (my own stupid fault) along with age factoring into the equation. Even if I did have a career background, being in my fifties is surely a disadvantage to being hired. I guess I am a total dichotomy, a fighter, strong but at the same time fragile.

[A few weeks later.] My husband is showing a little more flexibility. Do you have any suggestions on how to deal with him and avoid a divorce?

JEFF: The latest developments from your husband sound promising. Obviously, as a true believer, he will be interested in keeping the eternal bonds active between the two of you. And a divorce sometimes kills meaningful future priesthood leadership callings. And trust me, divorce will be worse than you can imagine. It is much better to negotiate a "deal" that you both can live with and so that you can enjoy one another and avoid the separation.

JESSICA: My husband thinks Sunstone is of the devil and doesn't want me reading the magazine or attending the symposium.

JEFF: You might tell him that the chair of the Sunstone board of directors has served as a mission president, and nearly all involved on the board and staff are faithful, supportive members of the Church. We just want to have freedom to think and talk about things, but always with the fundamental idea of being helpful, honest, and careful. Sunstone is a faithful forum for discussing issues facing Latter-day Saints. It is a resource for some and a refuge for others.

JESSICA: [A month later.] Amazingly, my husband has agreed to couples counseling if I read the Book of Mormon with him. We'll see. He says many things that do not come to fruition, but I was surprised anyway. I guess I can read the Book of Mormon with him (being that "student of Mormonism" as you suggested). However, at this point, I think it belongs on the fiction shelf with the exception of the large portion coming directly from the Bible. I guess he thinks I'm going to have that burnt-bosom epiphany.

JEFF: Study is always good, and if you do it with the intention of being one with your husband, it will have positive outcomes. And counseling can be terrific if it is done with someone who understands the dynamics of your situation.

JESSICA: On another matter, what do I do when my temple recommend is up and they start the pressure? Or when I'm brought in for that token consultation with respect to a new calling for my husband? Do I tell them how I really feel? How do I walk the line? Lie to them, or be honest with myself?

JEFF: There are ways of being tactfully honest that allow everyone be comfortable. You're a smart woman, and I suspect you know what to say. One approach is to use "faith," as your approach to any question. "Well, I don't know for sure, but I (can/will) accept that it is true (right) through faith."

[Several months pass, and things are not going well between Jessica and her husband.]

JESSICA: *Much to my surprise, [my husband] told one of our daughters everything and said we were likely to get a divorce. He claims I am trying to corrupt my family when I've said nothing to anyone about my problems. She called me sobbing, begging me not to get a divorce, saying she could not bear it, that it would kill her, and so forth. She begged us both to get marriage counseling. I wish I could just evaporate! My extended, non-Mormon family are appalled about "religion" causing so much pain and misery. Truly, I wish I could go to sleep and not wake up.*

[Two months later things are looking up.] *Actually my situation is better now. I am not challenging my husband (an exercise in total futility), and he has moved from being "religious" to being more "spiritual." As you know, we can be one without the other. There is more peace, acceptance, and accommodation now.*

JESSICA'S painful rollercoaster experience is not unique. Thankfully it is also not universal among long-term residents of the Borderlands. As I see it, in these difficult "true-believer and lost-my-testimony" couples, the problems which arise—those so sadly experienced by Jessica and her husband—often occur because (among other things) there is:

- a fear of impending changes in basic relationships,
- the worry of how important "membership groups" (family, quorum, ward) will respond when they "find out,"
- a lack of recognition of each other's points of view,
- an unwillingness to accept the other as they are,
- no real communication between the two partners,
- an inability to use Christ's principles of love for one another.

Let's do a little fantasizing. Suppose the conversation between Jessica and her husband could be like this:

JESSICA: *I have something important to talk to you about, and I hope you will understand my plight.*

Harry: Okay, you have my undivided attention.

JESSICA: *Although I thought I had a "testimony," I realize now that it was built on shaky*

ground and that I need to do some thinking about my relationship with God and the Church. And it's really causing me some turmoil inside. It's like I've lost a close companion. I'm sure you've noticed my silence in church lately.

Harry: This sounds serious.

JESSICA: *Yeah, I've learned some new things that have shaken my belief system to its very core, but I love you and want to do the right thing. Don't get me wrong, I love our involvement with the church, our ward neighbors, the things the Church does for people, the service we can render, and so forth. It is just that I'm really confused about the Joseph Smith story and the origins of the Book of Mormon.*

Harry: I know you love me, and I love you, too. We'll get through this together. And a testimony is only one part of our personal relationship with our Father in Heaven. I hope you'll once again find the peace of "knowing," but if not, it'll be okay. How can I be most helpful?

JESSICA: *If you'll just try to understand me and what I'm going through . . . and support me as I deal with this, and be there for me . . . that is all I need and want.*

Harry: No problem. [Harry takes her in his arms.] What do you want to do next?

JESSICA: *Nothing drastic. I want to keep going to church and be involved and tell people that I'm going to try to be faithful to Christ's teachings and continue to be same person I was before I lost my testimony.*

Harry: Jessica, I'm with you all the way. Even if you never get that testimony back, it's okay because I know the kind of person you are, and so does our Father in Heaven.

JESSICA: *Thanks. Together we'll weather this storm.*

Harry: What about the kids?

JESSICA: *Let's not alarm them. I'll let them know I love them more than anything else in this world, and that I won't cause any trouble for them—but I will be tactfully honest, without giving them any details about the cause of my concerns. And you can continue to bear your testimony to them. Being a faithful mom and Latter-day Saint will be almost as good, especially if we're working as a team.*

Harry: Well, in the end, all of our children will develop a relationship with our Father in Heaven that works for them, and each of them will work through the testimony issue. It could be a really healthy experience for them. But this could also be very traumatic for them if we don't handle it well. I'll follow your lead.

JESSICA: *Okay, but this is a team effort. And the kids come first.*

I REALIZE this conversation might be a little farfetched in today's LDS world. But we can dream about a better future, can't we? And all of us in the Borderlands can make that future happen now for our families, if we try.

If you have any thoughts for Jessica, please send me a letter or email. In the next issue, I'll share another Borderlander's experience. ☺

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 Figure 1.

2. See my December 2003 SUNSTONE column for a description of a personal religion built around the LDS model.

3. If Elder Holland responds and gives permission, I will let you know what he said.

4. Robert Kirby, "Thou Shalt Not Coerce Thy Spouse," *Salt Lake Tribune*, 2 June 2001.

Please send me any of your thoughts, experiences, or tales from life in the Borderlands.

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Pontius' Puddle

