

I am a Quaker, but my spiritual roots lie in the Mormon church. As I have made the Quaker tradition my own, I have sought to hear and understand more deeply the treasures in the Mormon tradition. Honoring those treasures deepens my Quaker faith. My hope is that it will also help other Quakers see the treasures in their own non-Quaker roots. Many Quakers come from other traditions, and the question of how someone came to Quakerism can lead to deep sharing. When people ask how I came to Quakerism, and hear that I grew up Mormon, they tend to express surprise, and often ask how I made such a large jump. I tell them that Quakerism wasn't a large jump from the understanding of Mormonism I was raised with, and I share some stories to explain.

The stories I tell are from the Book of Mormon. The Book of Mormon begins with the story of the prophet Lehi and his family as they leave Jerusalem shortly before it is destroyed (around 600BC). Lehi has a dream one night, which includes an image of an iron rod that runs beside a path that takes people to the tree of life. A fog comes up, and the people on the path that are holding the iron rod make it to the tree of life. The people who let go of the iron rod, wander away into the wilderness (1 Nephi 8:5-43). Shortly after the dream, Lehi and his family are wandering in the wilderness, not knowing which way to go. Lehi wakes up one morning to find a golden compass outside his tent. This is a special compass, called a liahona, which works according to the faith and diligence of the people. When the people are following God, one needle points in the direction to travel, and the other points in the direction where they will find food. (1 Nephi 16:10-28) When the people are not faithful, the two needles spin at random.

Like Lehi, many of us dream of an iron rod - something to hold on to that will just let us walk safely through life. And when we wake up, we find ourselves wandering in the wilderness with no more than an internal compass. We are torn between the vision of an iron rod and the reality of our own wanderings with a compass that has needles that sometimes just spin. We continue to dream of the iron rod, and we are drawn to the certainty of the iron rod. And some of us seek to make that dream reality by finding traditions that claim to be the iron rod. And while traditions that claim to provide an iron rod can serve well, unless they are checked with the compass on a regular basis, one can end up someplace completely different than desired. Others have let go of the dream to engage fully with the compass in the wilderness. Each of us emphasize different aspects of these two approaches at various times in our lives.

In the Mormon tradition there are people that follow each of these paths. The images of the people that seek an iron rod and people that seek a liahona were contrasted in an influential 1969 essay by Richard Poll in a liberal Mormon publication¹. I share these stories to make it clear that the Mormon tradition also has a place for people that are seeking to hear deeply the voice of the Spirit, in addition to holding the more public stereotype of a place for people who are seeking fixed rules that will guide them through life.

I was brought up in a family that worked to maintain a place within the Mormon tradition for people heeding the compass. I remember coming home from Sunday School, after a lesson on a story from the Book of Mormon. The prophet Nephi, at that time a young man, was told to go back to Jerusalem to get the records of his people (written on gold plates) from a man called Laban. He

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_D._Poll

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meets a drunken Laban on the street, and God tells him to kill Laban, dress in his clothes and go get the plates from Laban's house (1 Nephi 4:7-13). After mentioning the topic of the class to my mother, she asked why God had Nephi kill Laban. I parroted the response from my teacher, that the plates were very important, and that was the only to get them. Mom's response was "don't you think God could have figured out another way?" And that question has continued to resonate with me. Does what a religion teaches align with my deepest sense of goodness and love? Is the authority that the community respects in alignment with my own Guide? And when the cultural authority does not feel right, I strive to hear the deeper truths. One of the key tensions I carry in my life is between cultural authority and spiritual authority. How does what I hear from the community around me resonate with my own internal compass.

These stories, and the questioning and example of my parents, make it difficult for me to denigrate the Mormon church. I have plenty of experience with the human frailties of people in leadership positions in the Mormon church. But I also have a wealth of experience of thoughtful seekers within the Mormon church, heeding the Spirit they feel.

I know now that we are all, to varying degrees, stuck in a cultural framework. When we experience the Divine, powerful possibilities open up. We look at our world with new eyes and yearn to bring the outer world into alignment with that inner sense of rightness and love. But at every turn we are hampered by how well we can step outside of the cultural norms we grew up with.

The Old Testament is full of stories of how people understood their interaction with the Divine. And most of those stories are of people who see through a glass dimly - they see pieces of the truth, but are unable to hold the truths outside of the patriarchal framework and culture that was prevalent at the time. Jesus stepped fully outside his culture. That was the threat he posed - he brought a new vision of how people could live together without a need for domination and inequality, based instead on love and equality. But that vision is not easy to grasp, and Jesus' disciples were still embedded in their own times. And so after the four gospels, the remaining books of the New Testament step back partway into the patriarchal culture and us vs. them world view.

Joseph Smith experienced the Divine Presence. The Mormon tradition, like all religions, started with an interaction between humans and the Divine. When I started reading Quaker history, I could immediately see parallels between George Fox and Joseph Smith. Both of them had powerful experiences of the Divine. And on those experiences they built structures to create a unique religious community. The structure that Joseph Smith built has many pieces that feel out of alignment to me. The structure is a male hierarchy, with exclusive rewards for Mormons. Many religions have very elaborate structures, that detract from the original interaction with the Divine. As Quakers we have a fairly small structure, that we call Quaker process. At its best, every piece of our process points back to the interaction with the Spirit. I know that it doesn't always work. But I find myself more able to heed the call of the Spirit to radical re-visioning of how I live within the Religious Society of Friends.

A Living God – the heavens are not closed

Joseph Smith, like George Fox, worked to create a religious institution that could embody the reality that the heavens are not closed. The Mormon Church knows the Truth that God continues to speak to us. Every religion that believes in continuing revelation faces the challenge of how to control for false prophets - - knowing the power of the Spirit, how will the community discern that it is led by the One Spirit, and not by their own wishes or the adversary. Another way to approach the question

is where is the authority for discerning Truth. Some churches rely on written words – the Bible or other writings. Other traditions use a hierarchy that vests authority in leaders. Quakers put the responsibility on the community listening together. Mormons have placed responsibility in a hierarchy of “General Authorities.” Like the explanation of Dostoevsky’s Grand Inquisitor, the structure of the Mormon church assumes the unwillingness (and inability) of many people to accept responsibility for their own freedom and the need for some kind of spiritual authority. Many of us seek an iron rod, a sure path. And the Mormon Church speaks with certainty of the sureness of their path. Within the structure there is one man, the prophet, who is given authority to hear clearly what God speaks to the Church, and specific individuals are designated to hear and understand for those under their guidance within the corporate structure. The hierarchy is embedded within a cultural framework of patriarchy, justified with reference to the scriptures.

Another part of knowing that God continues to speak is emphasizing the study and personal practice that is involved in preparing oneself for that encounter. Within the Mormon tradition families and individuals are encouraged to study the scriptures. I remember being awoken early in the morning as a child, before school, so that we could read the scriptures together. Dad took the lead in this endeavor. He would wake up the five oldest girls and gather us on the floor around the wood stove, wrapped in blankets to keep warm. We sat on the floor, sometimes dozing as Dad read. He would stop periodically and ask us questions, so that we’d be more likely to stay awake. And we would gather for family prayer before breakfast or bedtime at night. We would gather in a circle, sing a song and then kneel together in prayer, thanking God for our blessings and asking for help in our daily lives. One of the common phrases was to bless the leaders of the church and the leaders of the country.

Teenagers in the Mormon Church are expected to attend seminary, which is a program of study offered either in the morning before school (early morning seminary), during school (released time, offered primarily in Utah and Idaho), or on Sunday mornings. The seminary program includes studying the scriptures - the Bible, Book of Mormon, Doctrine & Covenants and Pearl of Great Price -- memorizing key passages, and coming to your own testimony of the truth of the Mormon church and Gospel. There is a powerful emphasis on asking for a personal confirmation of the truth. Joseph Smith’s first experience of the Divine grew out of reading James 1:5-6 “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God - who giveth to all men liberally and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him. But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering.” And just as Joseph Smith asked, we, too, were encouraged to ask.

I felt the warmth of the Spirit in my body when I prayed about the truth of the Book of Mormon. For Mormons, the first Sunday of each month is called Fast Sunday. Members are encouraged to fast for 2 or 3 meals and to donate the money they would have spent on food, their “fast offering”, to the church to use for welfare assistance. In addition to fasting, the service on that Sunday is open worship where individuals share messages as they are led, about their own beliefs and how the Spirit is working in their lives. I remember standing during Fast and Testimony meeting to bear my testimony that I knew the church was true, and the Book of Mormon was the word of God.

In addition to daily spiritual practice, and weekly church attendance, many young men and women are encouraged to spend eighteen to twenty-four months of their lives, paid for by themselves

and their families, teaching people about the Mormon church. The experience of missionary work, of spending all of your time listening to what the Spirit would have you do, praying and asking which street to walk down, which doors to knock on, etc., in a community of others asking the same questions, is a very powerful formative experience. Time and again individuals will refer to their mission as the best two years of their lives.

The Kingdom of Heaven on earth – in the world but not of the world

The Mormon Church honors the importance of the spiritual community being the center of your life. Being Mormon was at the center of my world for the first twenty-something years of my life. As a family we read the scriptures, we tried to have Family Home Evening a couple of times a month, and we went to church for three hours every Sunday. But being Mormon isn't about Sundays - it's about your entire life. It's about the certainty of your place in the world that pervades your days, the sense of separateness from the world that can keep you from fitting in, and the culture that serves to keep members of the church distinct.

As a child in a Mormon family, I grew up singing songs like "I am a child of God, and he has sent me here," and "I know my Father lives, and loves me too, the Spirit whispers this to me and tells me it is true." I knew that if I listened to the leaders of the Church, followed their guidance, read my scriptures and prayed, that I would live with God when I died. There was always a clear sense of how I could be a better person, and the path I should be taking to live a better life. My life's plan was pretty straightforward - I would go to college (perhaps Brigham Young University), fall in love with a good Mormon boy, get married in the temple for time and all eternity, and have lots of children. As teenagers, most Mormons receive patriarchal blessings, given by men ordained to be the regional patriarch, and meant, in the tradition of the ancient patriarchs, to provide individual guidance and support. My patriarchal blessing, when I was 15, blessed me "with the blessings of motherhood that you shall be blessed with a large posterity of sons and daughters and they shall be stalwart and firm in the church and shall help to build up the kingdom of God and to carry the glad message of the gospel to the far corners of the earth."

While the Mormon church honors the importance of the spiritual community, it fails to grasp Jesus' message that there is no Jew or Gentile, and that we are all a part of the community regardless of whether we have been baptized into the Mormon church. There was a strong sense growing up of being different from (and better than) the non-Mormons around me. They didn't know what I knew about our place in the world. They only had the Bible, they didn't have the Book of Mormon and the other scriptures. And they didn't have temples, so they weren't going to be together as families for eternity, as Mormon families will be who are sealed in the temple. They also didn't have the Word of Wisdom, which is the source of the dietary guidelines and prohibition against alcohol, tobacco and caffeine that Mormons follow.

Some of the differences that kept us apart from the world were misunderstandings, and some were clearly cultural. Mormon church leaders advise all members to have a year's supply of food stored. That means all the food and water (or water purification system) your family would need to eat for a year. Having food storage means that you eat a lot of foods with long shelf lives - canned and dried foods. The storage has to be rotated on a regular basis, so you eat out of the food storage and replenish it with new purchases.

Every December we went to tithing settlement, where we confirmed to the leaders of the congregation that we had paid a full 10% of our income to the Church as tithing. The law of tithing that Mormons practice assures the financial security of the Church and the Mormon institutions. Brigham Young University, as a Mormon school, has Mormon and non-Mormon tuition, since it is supported by the tithing of Mormons. But the Law of Tithing also assures that those who follow it have a sense of abundance – they can live on 10% less than they have. And many stories are told of the blessings, financial and otherwise, that come when people pay their tithing. Unexpected doors open, money shows up, and all that is needed is provided when people pay their tithing. The Law of Tithing also honors the Truth that all that we have belongs to God.

Another Truth held by the Mormon Church is the need to care with love for all the members of the community. Within each local congregation there are a number of organizations - there is the Priesthood for the men, Relief Society for the women, Mutual for the teenagers, Scouts for the boys, and Primary for the kids. These organizations make it possible for leaders to be aware of members of the congregation in both the positive sense of caring for their needs, and in the negative sense of people feeling like they're always being watched and judged. Within the Relief Society there is a pair of visiting teachers assigned to check in with each woman on a monthly basis. And within the Priesthood there is a pair of home teachers assigned to check in with each household on a monthly basis. People that come to Mormonism are welcomed into a large community that works to help them as needed. And this community tends to be the focus of the members, limiting for many their activities in the larger world.

My Path to Quakers

As I grew older I went to college, first at Brigham Young University (BYU), and then at St. John's College in Santa Fe. When I look back, the patterns I see are of idealism, impatience and intolerance combined with a yearning for knowledge and growth. I continued to struggle with the tension between my own internal compass and the cultural standards (iron rod) used by those around me. At BYU my freshman year I was devastated to find that most other students weren't as interested as I was in going to lectures and seminars just to learn. I was there to come to know my place in the world, to get an education in the best sense of the word. I had been isolated in high school, and I was thrilled to have friends and interesting things to do, and my grades showed it. After two years I lost my scholarship because of low grades. While home in Idaho the following summer, I started looking for other schools. I was thumbing through Peterson's Guide in May or June, in search of schools whose application deadline had not yet passed, when I found St. John's College. The program of reading great books and discussing them together was very appealing. At BYU I had always sought people to discuss whatever I was reading. I applied to St. John's College, and was accepted.

At St. John's College I had my first opportunity to live within a non-Mormon environment. Yes, I'd had some experience in grade school and high school, but going to St. John's was different. There I was the only Mormon, in an environment that had no respect and little tolerance for a life of faith in anything except logic and science. And the local Mormon community was equally wary of me - the Bishop's daughter told me that her father said Mormons couldn't go to St. John's College, because it was against their religion. I tried to see with the eyes of my fellow students. There was

exhilaration as we talked and reflected and shared, and loneliness as I sought to be heard and understood. I struggled to help my friends see religion and faith with my eyes. As a 19-year-old I became ashamed of my faith, seeing it for the first time with the eyes of the liberal intellectual. My own yearning to be accepted and understood made it difficult for me to be so far outside of the norms of the community at St. John's. It was too hard for me to defend myself to the skeptical intellectuals. I couldn't answer their questions from a place of reason, and I wasn't ready to speak to them from the Spirit.

I only stayed at St. John's for one year, before going back to Brigham Young University. But once back at BYU I couldn't fit in either, and I left for the University of Washington. In Seattle I found friends and built a community of primarily Mormon friends who shared and played together. And I led a separate school life where I studied philosophy.

Before I met my husband John, I had been leaving the Mormon church - it was an extended process. At the beginning of my movement out of the Mormon church, while at St. John's College, I had a good friend tell me that I wouldn't have left until I wasn't angry. He helped me understand that as long as I was angry at the Mormon church I would still be reacting to it in my life. I took another 3-4 years of varying degrees of activity before I was really ready to leave the church.

Several threads led me out of the Mormon church. The greatest frustration was always having to struggle to make the church big enough to include me. I knew that the foundational Truth had room for reflection, criticism and deep listening. But the implementation of the doctrine in the community of the Mormon church was threatened by alternative voices. I was tired of putting so much of my spiritual energy into asking my community to be open to questioning and reflection. And there was little room in the Church for discussing patriarchy, hierarchy, equality and what it would mean to build a loving community of equals. The center of gravity in the body of the Mormon church was too different from my own, and I wanted the space in my life to not be continually defensive.

I didn't take the final step of asking that my name be removed from the records of the Mormon church until after I met John (he was raised Southern Baptist) and we committed to finding a belief system that we could share. When I left the Mormon church I wrote a formal letter asking that my name be removed from the records of the church. And my family was hurt. There were mixed reactions from my siblings and mother. My youngest sister, 8 years old at the time, wanted to know why I didn't want to be part of their forever family. Another sister was somewhat more supportive and said that there were some things we would just have to leave up to God to straighten out. But despite their initial anger and disappointment at my decision, I have maintained strong ties with a number of my siblings. Some of my family has left the Mormon church, others remain quite active Mormons.

As a child I read novels about Quakers that I really enjoyed. And when John and I moved to Cairo, Egypt in August of 1990, I noted in the expatriate newsletter that there was a Quaker worship group. Shortly after we got to Cairo we called and started to attend. It was in that group, during the first Gulf War, that I found people who felt as I did about the complexity of the situation and the short-sightedness of the international response.

After a year attending the worship group in Cairo, Egypt, we returned to the United States and moved to Ithaca, New York for graduate school. The first semester we were there we went to meeting for worship when we didn't have too much studying to do. But the next year we made a concerted effort to participate, and to attend on a regular basis. We started going to business

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meeting, and to committee meetings. And as we began to participate in Quaker process, I realized how much I appreciated that part of the Religious Society of Friends. The following year we moved to Vietnam, and spent sixteen months in Hanoi. There we met informally with a handful of other Quakers. I came to see that year that I missed meeting for business. I missed the opportunity for coming to know others in their humanness, which is most apparent as we try to take action and make decisions together. Coming back to Ithaca I applied for membership.

My Sense of Community

One of the threads in my life is the yearning to belong, to fit in, and my own willingness to bend in order to fit. That yearning is in constant tension with the desire for freedom and clarity of vision that comes from standing on the edge. As a child my family was on the edge of the Mormon church. My parents were very active, but their questioning, thoughtful approach to the teachings of the Mormon church was not widely understood. As a teenager I was on the edge in my high school. There my interest in learning, as a girl in a sports community, kept me on the fringes. When I started college at BYU the community was large enough that I could find others who were close to where I was. But again, my desire to question authority and to learn and understand a breadth of subjects brought me to the fringes and after two years I left.

At St. John's College I was on the edges in part because of my faith history. But even as I let go of my faith, I was still on the edge. When I moved to Seattle I worked for a time, and found myself much more within a community of other Mormon young adults. We played and worshiped together, and I relaxed and had fun. The questions of what community is, what it means, how we create and build it together are a key part of my life. And yet the desire for community is balanced with my yearning for the clarity of the edges. I find myself called to the edges - I've worked part-time at a university for the last five years, but have no interest in a full time position where I would have to become a part of the community. I treasure the independence and time that I have to read and reflect on a broad canvas. And in the different parts of my life I continue to balance the yearning for a "home" community and the hunger for the space in which to hear and see more clearly how the Spirit calls.