

# The Ghost of Eternal Polygamy

by Corbin Volluz | Dec 11, 2016 | Book Reviews, Featured, Polygamy | 8 comments



Review of "The Ghost of Eternal Polygamy, by Carol Lynn Pearson

Dear Carol Lynn,

I wanted to write and express my appreciation for your wonderful new book, "The Ghost of Eternal Polygamy." I read it this past weekend, which for me is fast. Once I started, I couldn't put it down. Your book is fascinating and eminently readable.

It is that good.

I wanted to share with you some of my thoughts about your book, and here they are in no particular order.

1. At the end of almost every chapter, you have a section which contains selected quotes from various respondents to your survey. I initially found these somewhat distracting; like the big chunk of Isaiah at the end of 2 Nephi. I wanted to skip them in order to get back to what **you** had to say. I realize that these quotations are important, as they come from real people suffering real pain from the Ghost of Polygamy. They are in a sense the *raison d'etre* for your entire book. You are not making this up! This is a very real problem in the LDS Church. And it is a problem that has remained unspoken from the pulpit but whispered in the hallways for far too long. Your book gives voice to these whispers, and brings this important subject out of obscurity into the light for all to see. The quotes from your survey prove how wide and deep go these scars that never felt a wound. While reading the chapters you wrote, I felt as if I were in a cathedral listening to your sermons, and after the chapter was over, reading through the "Voices" sections was like going outside for a walk in the churchyard among the numerous tombstones marking the resting place of the victims.

2. I wondered before reading the book how directly you would address the manner in which the LDS Church deals with its history of polygamy. I was surprised to hear forceful language from you on this issue. More forceful than I had expected. You encapsulate the Church's standard response: "Polygamy?" says the church. "We gave that up long ago." (6) Here is where you came in with the nod to Emily Dickinson: "But on this we do not tell the truth; we do not even tell it slant. We tell it veiled and hope the story will not be examined closely." Bingo! You hit the nail on the head. And when I read this, I immediately thought of President Gordon B. Hinckley's response to the same question about Mormons and polygamy where he brushed it aside, saying that was long ago and we don't do that anymore. *Next question!* I knew you must know of this quote from President Hinckley, and wondered if you were going to give him a pass by not mentioning his name. I would have understood if you had. But then you came back to the issue at the end of the book on page 198 and you did quote him directly! "Plural marriage is routinely and officially dismissed as a thing of the past.



President Gordon B. Hinckley said in essence on 'Larry King Live': "Polygamy? That has nothing to do with us. We gave that up long ago." And then you go on in italics for emphasis: " *Well, actually we did not. It's still active in our scripture, in temple sealings, and in the anticipation of what life will look like in the highest kingdom of heaven .* " Another comment right on the money! And I am impressed with your willingness to speak truth to power; and even name the power to whom you are speaking.

3. I think it wonderful that you knew even before writing the book how important it would be; that “this is one of those challenging, thrilling projects that you know will be life-changing.” (1) Like the Book of Mormon predicts its chilly reception at the hands of a Bible believing world, or like Babe Ruth pointing his bat to the left-field fence, you just knew how this book would be a game changer. You could sense that beforehand. And let me confirm that you were 100% correct in your prediction. Madam, I perceive that thou art a prophet.

4. In Chapter 1 where you relate your story, you quote your seminary teacher’s testimony about eternal polygamy, which he concluded, “I know that what I have said is true.” (13). I sensed your response to this testimony with a testimony of your own a few pages later, “But I now know for myself that the idea that maleness is more important than femaleness is a sad relic passed from generation to generation throughout most of history, a relic that not only is false but profoundly harmful to all humans of both genders. And I am personally persuaded that the Ghost of Eternal Polygamy exists today from error, that plural marriage never was—is not now—and never will be ordained of God.” These are strong words, Carol Lynn, and I can only imagine how carefully you chose them. I immediately thought that what you were in essence saying is that you do not believe that section 132 came from God. And indeed, you come out



and state just that on page 189, in your belief that “Section 132 of the Doctrine and Covenants will receive an ‘inspired revision’ with plural marriage removed from the cannon so that women and girls will be spared the wounding to our femaleness that we receive today.” And then I thought of what happened to Kirk and Lindsay Van Allen for posting a similar sentiment on social media in February of 2015, and how Kirk was threatened with church discipline over it.

And then I became concerned for what might happen to you as a result of expressing similar sentiments. And then I thought how strange it is to belong to a church where such concerns are not only possible, but completely expected. You have courage and strength to express yourself publicly in so direct a manner. And I just want you to know that I, and many others, have your back. You give us strength and courage to do the same. And ultimately, critical mass will be reached where there are too many voices to simply ignore, and too many Mormons standing up to be cowed into sitting down passively again.

5. One of your “other voices” wrote: “When I finally made the very difficult decision, with the blessing of my adult children, to cancel the sealing to my late first husband so I could be sealed to my second husband, whom I also dearly love—I had to pay a very, very high price.” (25) Another “voice” mentions the authorization that must be obtained from the First Presidency to cancel a temple sealing. I have personal experience with this. My second wife had to cancel her sealing to her deceased first husband to be sealed to me. She made the application; it went to the First Presidency; and we were shocked to find out that her deceased husband’s parents had to give permission for the cancellation to go through. What an awful position to put those parents in! Here they had a son married in the temple and with two beautiful children born in the covenant. Their son dies tragically. Their daughter-in-law, the mother of their grandchildren, now wants to be sealed in the temple to me. And it is the

parents of the deceased husband who have to make the call. What does agreeing to cancel the temple sealing mean for their deceased son? Is he now without the highest temple ordinances necessary to exaltation? What does this do to their grandchildren? Are they now severed in some eternal way from their grandparents? Why on earth do we have a system where the parents of a deceased son are forced to give the thumbs-up or thumbs-down on a subsequent sealing? This is just cruel. In our situation, both parents of the deceased first husband were incredibly gracious. They did not ostracize their daughter-in-law from the family, as happened to the "voice" in your book. But I cannot imagine the distress they must have gone through, in spite of how graciously they presented. If anything, the fact they were so gracious only served to make their sacrifice all the more heart breaking.

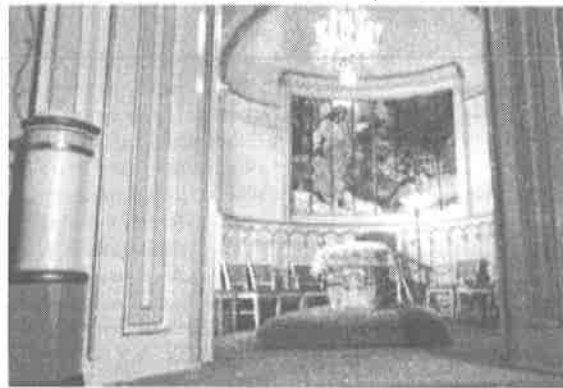
This happened two decades ago. The granddaughter in this story was very young at the time of these events. Today I told her for the first time about what happened. She is now twenty-eight years old. What she saw in the story was different from what I saw. I saw the impact on her grandparents. She saw the impact on her mother. What she said was, "This shows how in Mormonism women can't make decisions for themselves!"

6. I learned many things from your book I had not really considered before. One of these is the church policy that children born in a subsequent non-temple marriage are considered the children in eternity of a prior husband sealed to the same mother. Many of your "voices" mentioned this issue and how hurtful it was to them—that a husband sealed to a wife in the temple, where the husband subsequently dies and the wife remarries without getting the prior sealing cancelled, somehow has custody or fatherhood of any children born to the wife in subsequent marriages. I had heard of this only once before and it was actually earlier this year when I was speaking on the phone with my 28-year old daughter who lives in Utah. For some reason, the conversation had gotten around to why it was she became disaffected from the LDS Church. I was surprised by her answer. She became disaffected largely owing to this exact same policy! Here is how it worked with her. She is the daughter of my first marriage. Her

mother got remarried after our divorce and had several daughters by her second husband.

These are my daughter's step-sisters, but she considers them her sisters for all intents and purposes, having grown up with them in Utah. Sometime at church, when my daughter was a young woman, she encountered the craziest idea she had ever heard. That her step-sisters, whom I have never even met, somehow did not really belong to their biological father, but

belonged to me by virtue of the temple sealing I had with their mother. My daughter, not believing this could be true, talked to several other people about it, only to have it confirmed that this was, in fact, the policy of the church. This was one of the main things that led her out of the church. Who could believe in a church with a teaching that was so contrary to human nature and experience? That could be so cruel, cold and calculating? That could use the rituals of the church, which are supposed to exist for the bringing together of the family, to tear families apart? Case closed. At least as far as my daughter was concerned. Chalk one more victim up to the Ghost of Polygamy.



7. In chapter 3, you systematically dismantle fourteen reasons commonly given for why plural marriage was practiced, and find them wanting. If the reason for practicing polygamy is so straightforward, one wonders why there are so many reasons that have been given for it over the years. The fact there are fourteen such reasons suggests that none of the reasons standing alone is entirely adequate. These reasons have been around for a long time, and represent the best efforts of the LDS Church to defend the practice. But when you capably show, as you do, that none of these reasons hold water, you force the reader to grapple with the ultimate issue of how to view a prophet who introduces such a harmful practice, and how to view a God who spoke through him. Once you have dismantled all the artificial answers for polygamy, you have excavated down to bedrock; the real “why” questions. Why did Joseph Smith introduce it? And why did God authorize it? Or if God did not authorize it, why did God permit it?

8. You make several statements in your book seeking for a way to deal with the fact that polygamy was instituted by Joseph Smith, and yet find a way to continue to accept Joseph as a prophet of God, though one capable of error, even egregious error. “I believe that seeing Joseph’s polygamy as an error is the kindest way to evaluate it. And the surest way to correct it.” (70) You say of Joseph, “I love him with a heart that he broke a long time ago.” (46) And yet you sometimes wondered whether it was exclusively Joseph’s error, or whether God was really behind it after all. “But ‘women’s issues,’ with the whole mess of polygamy dead center—that



was Joseph’s fault. Unless it was God’s fault. I still sometimes entertained that terrible thought.” (34) I did notice the use of the past tense in that sentence. *Entertained*. You perhaps at one time entertained that thought, but you do no longer? “I was forever finished with the insane attempt to love a God who hurts me.” (69) This is a very delicate area, and one that yields no clear-cut answers. But a number of thoughts came to my mind that I had hoped to hear your views on, as you have obviously considered the issue deeply. You label your attempt to love a God who hurts you “insane.” And yet you also profess your love for Joseph Smith in spite of the fact he broke your heart. (35, 46) If your attempt to love a God who hurts you “insane,” do you feel the same about your love for Joseph?

Is it that you are still able to love Joseph Smith in spite of his hurtful errors because he is a fallible human being, while you believe a loving Father in Heaven, theoretically incapable of error, would never introduce such a practice so harmful to his daughters? As I say, these are questions with no easy answers, but sometimes just having the space to ask such questions is freeing in its own way.

9. I think you are brave for putting your feelings out there on the table. This issue is full not only of pain, but of tension and dissonance. The tensions you express give others permission to hold similar ideas in tension, with no easy answers. The question that keeps coming to my mind is, “Why?” If it is an error, why did Joseph go there? And if Joseph simply had to go there, why did Joseph feel compelled to make polygamy the centerpiece of his plan of salvation? Why does Joseph, who brought us the sole scriptural condemnation of polygamy in the Book of Mormon (Jacob 2), also give us Section 132 commanding polygamy? And where was God in all

this? Could not the same God who had Jacob denounce polygamy have the man who produced the Book of Mormon do the same? If angels with drawn swords enforced the practice of polygamy, could not angels with drawn swords prohibit it? Or do angels with drawn swords have only one purpose?

In conclusion, I congratulate you on a book that considers polygamy from every angle. For a book of only a couple hundred pages, this is a remarkable achievement. Most importantly, you were correct in your initial assessment—this is an important book! It brings the Ghost that has haunted Mormonism for over a century out into the light. As with many such specters, the simple act of bringing it out of the shadows is a powerful antidote to its ability to molest or make afraid.

And yet, there is more work to be done, and you do not leave this important work unaddressed. You set forth in Chapter 11 your thoughts on what must be done to work "Toward a Partnership Future." You write not simply to critique, but to show a better way. And in the final chapter you give a stirring homage to Joseph Smith, relating his final hours with the best of history and poetry combined. And here is where you make me understand why it is that you love Joseph, in spite of his errors. And—dare I say it—you make me love him, too.

Thank you for this book, Carol Lynn.

Thank you for your poetry.

Thank you for your honesty.

Thank you for your courage.



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## Corbin Volluz

Corbin Volluz lives in the beautiful foothills of the Cascade Mountains in western Washington state. He has been practicing law for 25-years with a focus on criminal defense and personal injury. Corbin joined the LDS Church in June of 1978, shortly after the lifting of the priesthood ban, and has been studying Mormonism ever since. He has been published in several venues, including the Journal of Book of Mormon Studies and BYU-Studies.

All posts by Corbin Volluz

## 8 Comments

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