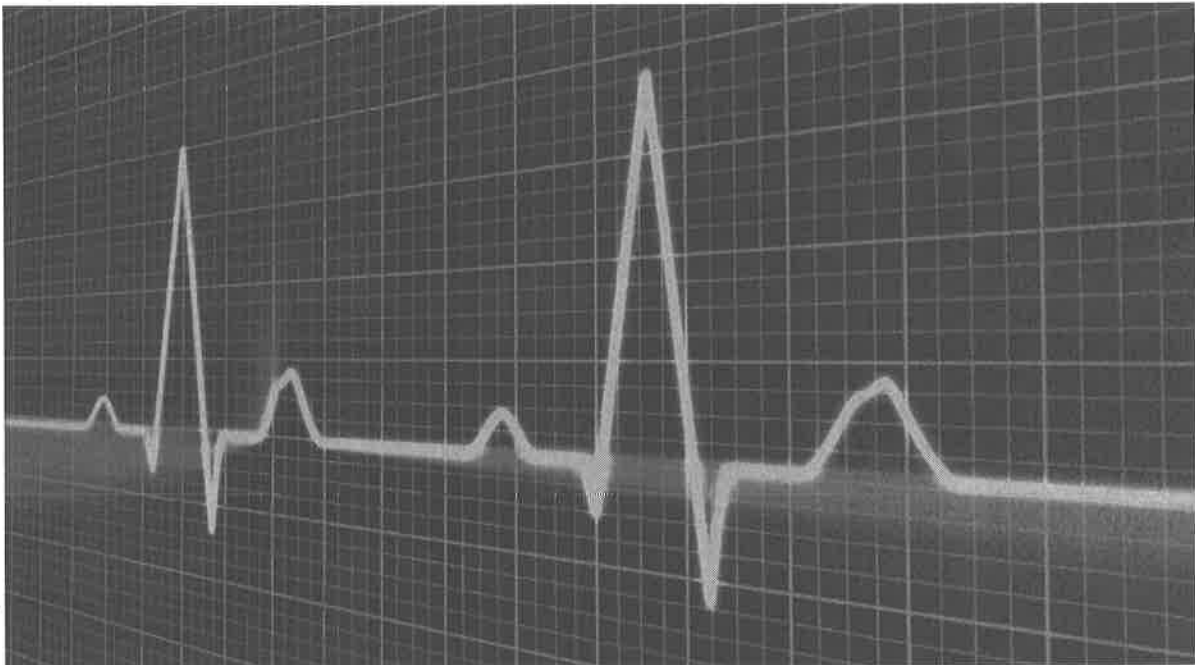


What to say to a friend who is leaving the Church

by Jeff Swift | May 25, 2016 | Apostasy, Church, Compassion, Disagreement, Faith Crisis, Featured | 8 comments



Note: this post follows up on a previous post about how to respond when a friend or loved one struggles with their testimony and a related post from ldsmissionaries.com. I highly recommend both.

It seems that just about everyone these days has a friend, a cousin, a spouse, or a child who is either considering leaving the Church or has already left. Every situation is different, but there are some general principles that apply in a wide variety of situations.

We'll start with the easy stuff—what NOT to say:

1) Are you reading your scriptures?

You might not be meaning to, but you are essentially blaming the person's struggles on them. When someone tells you they have cancer, you don't ask them if they've been eating right. "Oh, well, yeah. You've been eating way too many potato chips lately. So I guess I can see where the cancer came from." That's neither empathetic nor loving. The same is true for people struggling with their testimony.

2) [Draw a line in the sand]

Some well-meaning members will say things like "it all hinges on X: if you don't obey X commandment, why obey any of them?" or "Either Y is 100% true or the entire Church is a lie." We like to draw these lines in the sand because it makes things very simple. Black or white. True or false. Either the thing I believe is 100% true, or it's 100% false. Well-meaning members think these sand lines will draw the person back into the fold by using the person's remaining beliefs to convince them that X or Y is also true.[1] But the well-meaning Mormon is actively driving sheep from the fold.

We know what the Savior does when even one sheep leaves the fold *for whatever reason*, and it involves leaving the ninety and nine. We're just creating a lot more work for Him when we encourage people to stop coming. The best smell at an LDS sacrament meeting is cigarette smoke. The best look is jeans and a t-shirt on someone who hasn't come for six months. The best sound is someone asking the hard questions or struggling with the uncomfortable truth. It's supposed to be a hospital, right? The people you think are the sickest are the ones you should make feel the most welcome.

3) Just *choose* to believe.

This one makes so much sense until you think about it. What if I told you to just choose to believe that Hillary would be the best president. Or Trump. Look—just choose to believe. Just have the desire to believe and you will. The problem here is simple: do the research into psychology and persuasion. That's not how human beings work. It just isn't.

Desire can lead to *faith in Christ*, but it can't shoehorn someone into believing something they don't believe. So when you pretend it can, you're driving a wedge between you and your friend. You're telling them "I have no idea what you're going through, and you can tell that because I'm giving you overly-simplistic advice that wouldn't work for me if our places were switched, but I haven't tried putting myself in your shoes, so I don't know that."

4) Be careful where you're getting

your information.

If we attack entire information sources as anti-Mormon, we're painting ourselves into a corner when some of those information sources spout information that is factually correct. We're essentially telling people "the truth is anti-Mormon if it comes from the unapproved sources." That's a fairly dangerous realm to enter. Do we really want to send that message?

I've had people tell me that a particular historical fact is anti-Mormon. Here's the problem with that: the historical fact happened. It's documented. It's there in history. We know it happened. So, if you tell me that it's anti-Mormon, what message does that send? That facts are anti-Mormon? Nobody wants to send that message. So stop sending it.

5) Stop thinking about *those* issues. Just focus on the Core Gospel Truths.

You first. If you want your friend to focus only on the Core Gospel Truths (which, I've found, isn't a very concrete term to begin with) stop telling pioneer stories. Stop interpreting the Book of Mormon to back up your political opinions. Stop telling people that fellow members who think differently than you on non-central issues are chaff, led by Satan, and out to destroy the Church. Stop caring when people crack irreverent Mormon jokes or line up outside during Priesthood Session or decide to not go on a mission. Stop defending BYU's honor code as if it were Perfect Eternal Truth From the Mouth of God. Stop fuming when Mormons support legalizing marriage equality.

See, it's not that easy. Don't make your friend do it if you're not willing to.

6) But you had a spiritual experience! You think God didn't know about those issues when He gave you that spiritual experience?

Think of a respected friend who tells you she doesn't like broccoli. You can tell her all you want "but you liked it two weeks ago, remember?" You can even tell her "you're being prideful, you need to sustain the cook." But will that make her like broccoli today? It might make her try it, but what if she *actually* doesn't like it? People change. No amount of telling someone they used to like a food, or telling them that you like

the food, or telling them they are prideful for not liking the food, will make them like the food. It might, in fact, make them start hiding their real likes/dislikes from you. But, you can't talk someone into liking a food. The same is true for religion. We all know this--no missionary converts people to the Church. Nobody talks someone else into a testimony.

"Okay, so now what," you might be saying. "This isn't fair--you've just taken every single arrow from my quiver. You're telling me there's nothing I can say to help someone come back to the Church. You sound pretty evil to me, you anti-missionary."

And to answer your question: yes. I *am* saying that you can't argue someone back into the Church. But maybe that shouldn't be your number-one priority. We've all spoken with someone whose primary goal is to make us believe that they are right. We've all spoken with someone who is not willing to be wrong. It's not fun. It feels like they care more about being right than about being friends.

Here are six things to say when your friend leaves the Church:

1) Wow, that must have been a very difficult decision to make. What can I do to help?

Many (most?) people take this decision very seriously--assume your friend did as well.[2] It's easy to think that a person hasn't been very thoughtful if they come to a different conclusion than we have. But it means a lot when we express trust in our friend's thoughtfulness. We send them a clear message: "I'm friends with you, not your testimony."

2) Want to catch a movie this weekend?

Expressing doubt about a core tenet of a community is one of the quickest ways for someone to feel they no longer have any place in that community. If you're able to show that you'd still like to spend time with your friend, that you don't think they have modern-day religious leprosy, your relationship will be that much stronger. *BONUS: if you both have kids, make it clear that your kids will still be spending time with their kids. Do the opposite, and you're kicking the sheep on its way out of the fold.*

3) Tell me about it.

Members of a tight-knit community focused on converting others are often untrained in the art of listening. Put aside your inner *Preach My Gospel*, or at least turn it to the section about listening. Ask a lot of open-ended questions. Let your friend talk, and don't try to poke holes in their arguments or take a Bold Stand For Truth And Righteousness. Right now, your friend needs to be heard and loved, *not* convinced.

4) Have people in your ward been giving you a hard time about it?

Disagreeing with your friend's opinion but still respecting it is one of the most valuable gifts you can give. It is very likely that few people in your friend's ward will be able to do this. If you are, you will strengthen your relationship immeasurably.

5) So, what's next?

Sometimes we let our personal preconceived notions fill in blanks differently than our friend would. Maybe if you thought X or Y weren't true, you would immediately get drunk at a brothel. So when your friend loses their testimony in X or Y, it's easy to assume drunken brothel time is just around the corner. But that's almost never a fair assumption. Ask. Listen.

6) You know, I don't agree with the way you said that, but I think I understand what you're getting at. You're saying . . .

This one demands a lot from you, so I'll include a PS to your friend below. It requires the incredibly hard action of turning the other cheek. But that means you might get hit on both cheeks.

Your friend is likely hurting right now. He or she might lash out in one way or another at the Church, the ward, your Bishop, the prophet, the Book of Mormon, the Temple. Lashing out is not okay, so the worst thing you can do is to lash out back.

PS: to friends who leave the church: try not to lash out. You're hurt, you're in pain. It sucks. But try not to speak angrily about the Church to other members. You'll end up self-fulfilling your prophecy of rejection if you're mean to Mormons. They'll stop wanting to be around you. Can you blame them? Nobody feels comfortable around people who angrily attack their beliefs.[3]

Conclusion

The above 12 suggestions are just that: suggestions. Situations differ. People change. What is appropriate to say at one time might be insulting three weeks later. You know your friend. Focus on your friendship, send the message that you care about your friend as a person just as much as you cared about them as a Mormon.

We can't expect to convince people to come back, but we can bring people closer to Christ insofar as we act toward them the way Christ would act.

[1] the 9th Article of Faith teaches that still have a lot of great and important things to learn. Might one of those new revelations help us more fully understand X or Y, or maybe even completely overturn X or Y?

[2] Come, Join With Us. President Uchtdorf. October 2013 General Conference. Quote: "One might ask, "If the gospel is so wonderful, why would anyone leave?" Sometimes we assume it is because they have been offended or lazy or sinful. Actually, it is not that simple. In fact, there is not just one reason that applies to the variety of situations. Some of our dear members struggle for years with the question whether they should separate themselves from the Church."

[3] Read these if you're going through a faith crisis/transition/heterodox experience/whatever you want to call it:

WHAT TO EXPECT WHEN YOU ARE EXPECTING A FAITH CRISIS (p.s. IT SUCKS)



As I have actively watched the online discussions regarding faith-crises/faith-transitions, I've noticed something strange. While there is excellent advice on how to work through it – for example the Givens' book, *The Crucible of Doubt*, and Patrick Mason's, *Planted: Belief and*

Belonging in an Age of Doubt – I haven't found anything that tells us what to expect when ... Continue reading





To those in a faith crisis and their loved ones

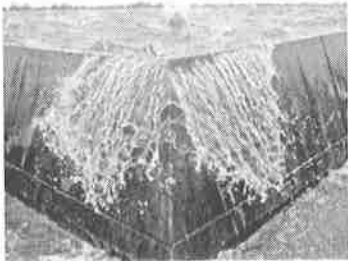
As I browsed several posts from people just entering into the depth of their faith crisis, I felt moved to attempt to address them. There have been so very many posts doing the same thing, but hopefully this will be of some help to some of you struggling.



Rational Faiths | Mormon Blog

When the Levee Breaks

IF IT KEEPS ON RAINING.
THE LEVEE'S GOING TO BREAK...



The levees holding back the doubts of thousands of Mormons are starting to burst. Fortunately, support and peace can be found as we heal the wounded and we rebuild in the flood plains. Lori Burkman talks about faith transitions and how to heal.



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