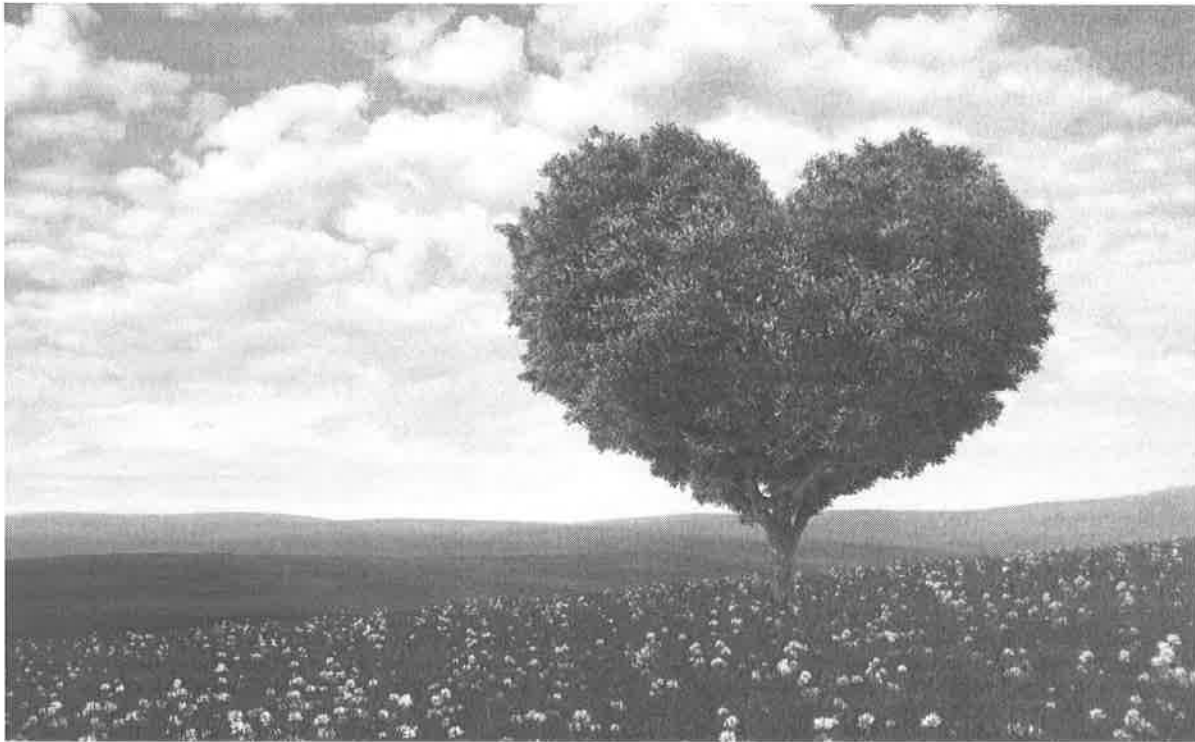


My Faith Crisis: What was Helpful? What was Hurtful?

by Guest Blogger | Dec 12, 2017 | Charity, Church History, Compassion, Faith, Faith Crisis, faith crisis, Featured, Honesty | 1 comment



*The following is adapted from a talk prepared for a Stake Conference meeting two years ago in the United States. It was delivered by one of my good friends who was generous to share her experience (names and other personal information have been changed). While my friend's story has somewhat of a "happy ending," it is important to remember that not all stories will result in a return to activity in the church. In cases like this, it is even **more** vital that friends and family do everything they can to apply the "medicine" that my friend so vulnerably describes below and especially for the motivations that she describes. (Further excellent resources are linked to at the end.) We Mormons should also consider that the way we traditionally define "happy endings" is not necessarily the same way that our own religious tradition does, and that if we take Jesus at his word, we will all have "happy endings."*

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Three-and-a-half years ago on New Year's Eve, my husband Daniel and I were in the car, rushing our three-year-old son Joshua to the Emergency Room. We were at a friend's house that night where he had unknowingly eaten a peanut and was having an anaphylactic reaction. As I was

cradling him in my arms in the back of the car while my husband drove, I was literally watching his throat close and hearing him wheeze to death. Through tears both Daniel and I called out to Heavenly Father. We begged him to spare our son's life. Although still frightened and unsure that we would make it to the hospital in time, we did feel God's presence so strongly. Heaven felt so close it was almost as if the roof of the car was not there. Despite the craziness, as we were in route to the hospital, I felt prompted to call the ER and tell them we were on our way. I was able to give all our personal information, as well as the details of the situation, so that when we drove into the valet parking and ran out of the car with Joshua, whose eyes were now swollen shut and was close to being unresponsive, there was a nurse waiting for us who wheeled me back with Joshua in my arms to a room waiting with an entire crew of medical staff. Joshua was taken from my arms and in the good care of these physicians, nurses and medical assistants he received everything he needed to become well again.

This was a traumatic event for our family, and it changed the way we viewed and handled life. For example, we now carry an epipen with us at all times, and send it with Joshua wherever he goes. When we show up to a social gathering or ward activity, the first thing we do is scan the food and dessert table for potential threats. We have done a lot of work to help Joshua know what is a safe food and what is not. We have made several trips to the gas station to look at the candy and find the ones that have peanut butter. We have taught his older siblings to read food labels and to help look out for him as well. I now have a completely new understanding and empathy for families that deal with food allergies.

I am going to liken this story about my son Joshua to having a crisis of faith, or a "faith crisis." A good definition for the term "faith crisis" is: "a term commonly applied, especially in Western culture, to periods of intense doubt and internal conflict about one's preconceived beliefs or life decisions." Two years ago I came upon some shocking and disturbing (at least to me) aspects of church history. Upon my discovery of these things, I had what you could call an "anaphylactic reaction." Over the course of several months, I became unsure of my ability and desire to stay in the church because of the things I had learned about. In my mind, the historical facts didn't add up to truth. My mind became filled with so much doubt, I thought about it every day, and I wasn't sure how to fix it. Just as we cried out to Heavenly Father while driving to the hospital with Joshua, I prayed to Heavenly Father regularly and was completely honest with Him about how I was feeling about everything. Although still unsettled, I felt God's love for me. He had his arms wrapped around me during this time, and I always felt that I was His daughter.

Although I had God's love and presence in my life, I needed people. Just as Joshua needed medical professionals to put leads on his chest, hook him up to an IV drip, check his vitals, administer epinephrine and even give him a sticker at the end of the ordeal, I needed people who could help me through this difficult time in my life.

One mistake that I made was keeping my feelings, doubts and overall trauma to myself, with the exception of my saintly husband. I was scared to talk openly about this at church. I was afraid to confide in anybody. How could I, somebody who had once been able to stand and profess such absolute truth, now admit that I wasn't sure if the Church was true anymore? So I kept it inside and although I showed up to church each Sunday, I was falling apart beneath the surface. Finally, after eight months of suffering in silence, I couldn't handle it any longer and started to open up a bit about what I was thinking and struggling with. As you can imagine, I received a wide variety of

reactions from people, some helpful and some hurtful, and even a few I would categorize as harmful. Here are some of the comments and reactions that were *less than helpful*:

- "You've lost your faith."
- "What have you done to lose the Spirit?"
- "Everything you've read is anti-Mormon material."
- "I feel badly for your kids and husband."
- "You don't need to refer to this as a crisis."
- "You're dark."
- "You're status has fallen in the ward, you used to be on a pedestal, and now...."
- "Do you feel the need to be angry?"
- "You're too smart, and if you're not careful, you will intellectualize yourself right out of the Church."
- "It would be better for you to have broken the law of chastity than to have these doubts."

And all conversations or interactions that had a hidden agenda, or people who actively distanced themselves for whatever reason.

All of these statements/actions were hurtful, and did nothing but push me further away and make me feel even less of a desire to remain in the church body. To get back to our medical analogy: this was not the right kind of medicine.

I have asked myself many times why would people react this way? Why do we sound the alarm, jump to conclusions or judgement so quickly, and become so defensive when people raise questions, concerns or doubts? Although perhaps well-intended by the speaker, these statements are hurtful every single time. They are also, at least in my case, untrue. I have come to the conclusion that often times, statements like these are based in fear. We fear that somebody who leaves the church won't be happy anymore. Maybe we fear that they will make wrong choices. Do we fear that they won't make it to the Celestial kingdom? It could just be that we fear the unknown, and that we have labeled things as anti-Mormon to prevent ourselves from facing hard facts. Or we tell ourselves that somebody is just lacking faith, or has sinned and lost the Spirit and that must be the reason they are questioning or uncertain.

What do the scriptures say about fear? 1 John 4:18 "perfect love casteth out fear." What is a "perfect love?" When I think of a "perfect love" I think of Christ's love: charity. In 1 Corinthians chapter 13, Paul teaches about charity in verses 1-8 and again in verse 13.

1 Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become a s sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.
 2 And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing.
 3 And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.
 4 Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up,

5 Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil;

6 Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth;

7 Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.

8 Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away.

13 And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.

Brothers and Sisters, according to this passage of scripture, charity, or the pure love of Christ, *is even more important than our own faith and hope*. This is a bold statement. How many of us are striving for that kind of charity? How important is it to you? As Paul says, it is even greater than faith and hope.

I have definitely been the recipient of great acts of charity, and while some of the responses received were hurtful, many more were helpful. Here are some responses and reactions that were very helpful:

- "It's okay."
- "I understand."
- "You're normal now, most people have questions and doubts."
- "It's a choice to believe."
- "You belong here."
- "It's okay if you don't know the church is true."
- A set of visiting teachers who truly befriended me. Who came every month and sometimes let me express my anger and frustration. Who never tried to change my mind or convince me to stay in the church. Who listened and loved and sometimes didn't say anything at all. Who created a safe place for me to be me. *Who cried with me, instead of for me.*
- A few sisters in my ward, who like my VTers, accepted me for who I was. Who weren't afraid to talk with me about difficult issues. Who didn't treat me like I was a project or a problem to be solved. Who didn't judge, but rather supported and validated. Who told me I was a good person, no matter what church I went to or what my beliefs were. Who bore my burdens, and believed in me.
- An elderly brother in our ward who, upon hearing of my struggle with faith, simply said with tears in his eyes, "I've been there too."
- A RS sister who finds me after every lesson I teach and whispers in my ear "You're a spiritual giant." (I know she is stretching the truth here, but it sure makes me feel good.)
- A husband who has held me while I wept, picked me up when I have fallen, loved me fiercely through all my doubts/questions/concerns and heartaches. Who has been more patient and loving than I thought was humanly possible. Who has counseled me and listened to me endlessly. I can't tell you of the late and long nights spent processing. Truly a loyal companion.

These kinds of responses are the right medicine. And when given the right medicine, chances are that people will heal.

This is not to say that I am the same as I was before. I didn't magically go back to believing everything and having everything work out perfectly as it had seemed to before. Faith didn't suddenly become easy for me. On occasion, it can be pretty hard for me still. Hope has become an important concept in my life and a common word in my vocabulary. Belief has become a choice. Even when people heal, they usually have scars of some sort. Just as my son Joshua's life changed forever after learning what a serious allergy he had to peanuts, my life has changed forever as well. There are some "peanuts" for me at church now. I have a few things on the shelf, a few topics that I simply avoid or just try to be okay not thinking about too much. However, just as a child with allergies can learn to cope in life, so can somebody who has questions with faith. It might take a little more vigilance, but it can be done.

Because there were people in my life who truly cared about me and loved me with the pure love of Christ, I was able to find a place again in the Church. Because I chose to stay, I began to see and recognize things that have happened in my life that I can't deny. The feelings that I had at my baptism, my patriarchal blessing, and a Priesthood blessing given to me about seven years ago by my husband that resulted in a miracle are things that I have not been able to explain away. These three experiences with the priesthood have, at times, been my only link to belief. I am hopeful that more witnesses will come with time, but if not, I believe and understand enough to keep on going forward. I can choose to believe and hold on to the good parts of the gospel and of this Church.

Let us have the courage to exercise charity, the pure love of Christ. It is so important to our Father in Heaven and the Lord. Let us be kind, let us suffer long, and let us create a safe place for people to be. A safe place for people who have differences of opinion, differences in their struggles, differences even in their faith. Let us be more like our Savior. Just as the scripture says, "Charity never faileth," and I can testify that it won't.

Other excellent resources include:

- *So, you want to help someone going through a faith crisis...* by Uncorrelated Mormon
- *What to say to a friend who is leaving the Church* by Jeff Swift
- *25 Things NOT to Say to a Loved One Leaving the Church (& what to say instead)* by Julie de Azevedo Hanks
- *What To Do If Someone You Know Is Going Through A Faith Crisis* by Boyd Peterson
- *Planted: Belief and Belonging in an Age of Doubt* by Patrick Mason
- *Surviving a Faith Crisis (and How Church Members Can Help)* by Patrick Mason
- *What Stage is Your Faith?* by Dr. Greg
- *Gospel Topics Essays* (Most LDS church members haven't actually read these, or even know they exist. Before engaging in discussions with loved ones who struggle with hard issues, consider reading each of these essays carefully and thinking about their implications.)