



Whether you call it a crisis, a journey, or a dark night of the soul, it's a very real experience, and a path that many others have travelled. These letters are what I would have hoped for when I started my faith journey, an intention to let people know that they aren't walking it alone, and hope that the dark night eventually gives way to dawn.

You can also find these letters at [www.lettersforthejourney.com](http://www.lettersforthejourney.com), where I am giving others the opportunity to share something from their own journey. Your comments or letter submissions are welcome at [letters4thejourney@gmail.com](mailto:letters4thejourney@gmail.com).

Rev 1.0

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A short introduction to why I have written these letters.

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Your faith transition likely began with the best of intentions—seeking to understand, defend, or deepen your beliefs. You did nothing wrong by asking questions. Yet, you may feel guilty because you've been taught that seeking knowledge beyond approved sources is dangerous. Others may try to impose that guilt on you, framing your journey as rebellion or temptation. But journeys are needed, and questioning is not a flaw—it's a sign of engagement, curiosity, and integrity.

## 2. Letter Two: Your Personal Journey is Yours Alone

No two faith transitions look the same. While you may learn from others' experiences, your emotions, discoveries, and path forward will be uniquely yours. Some people move quickly; others take years. Some find a new faith, while others embrace a broader spirituality or secular path. Allow yourself the freedom to walk your own road without comparison or pressure.

## 3. Finding Assurances in the Journey

What you're experiencing has been studied, written about, and walked by many before you. Models of faith development, such as Fowler's Stages of Faith or the Hero's Journey, can help you understand where you are. There's no right or wrong stage, and you may move back and forth between them. Rather than feeling lost, you may find comfort in realizing that this is part of a larger human experience.

## 4. Journeys Take Time

There's no deadline for reaching clarity. Faith transitions often unfold over months or even years. You may cycle through stages of belief, doubt, and reconstruction multiple times. There's no need to rush—processing your emotions, learning new perspectives, and making peace with uncertainty all take time. Endure, but without unnecessary urgency.

## 5. You'll Have More Questions Than Answers

For a long time, you may have believed that all spiritual questions had concrete answers. Now, that certainty may feel like it's slipping away. It can be unsettling, but over time, you may come to find peace in not needing to have all the answers. The unknown is not something to fear—it can be a space for growth and possibility. Introduction of tension.

## 6 Healing, hurting, and Nourishing Yourself Along the Way

The pain you're feeling is real and telling you something important. You deserve healing and peace, even if you never receive the apologies you might wish for from those who caused hurt.

## **7. You'll Experience a Range of Emotions Tension**

Faith transitions bring a flood of emotions—confusion, betrayal, anger, grief, relief, and even joy. Each emotion is natural and valid. They are signals, revealing the depth of your experience and what matters most to you. Give yourself permission to feel them fully rather than suppressing or dismissing them.

## **8. The Urge to Share—Proceed with Care Maybe better as**

You may feel an intense need to talk about what you've learned. Finding someone safe to share with is important but be cautious—especially with those still deeply embedded in the church. Many church members, especially leaders, may struggle to understand your journey, and once you share certain thoughts, you can't take them back. Protect your own space while being mindful of how your words may affect others.

## **9. Letting Go of Black-and-White Thinking**

Many faith traditions, including LDS teachings, encourage absolute thinking—right vs. wrong, truth vs. deception. But life, faith, and history are rarely that simple. It's normal to initially swing between extremes, but over time, you may find yourself embracing the nuance, paradoxes, and complexity of the human experience.

## **10. People**

As your views evolve, you may see historical figures, church leaders, or even family members differently. Someone you once admired may seem deeply flawed, while someone you dismissed may now appear insightful. Try to hold space for complexity—people are not just "good" or "bad" but a mixture of both. Understanding this can bring both heartache and a newfound sense of compassion.

## **11. Wrestling with Faith, Belief, and Uncertainty: The Shelf**

Your relationship with belief itself may change. You may struggle with what faith means outside of rigid certainty. Is belief a choice? A feeling? A practice? You might even find comfort in the idea that faith and doubt can coexist. Uncertainty isn't the absence of belief—it can be a deeper, more open way of engaging with the world.

## **12. Redefine Scripture**

You can expand your definition of scripture beyond traditional texts to include anything that brings you closer to the divine. Create your own canon of sacred writings that inspire and teach you to love better.

## **13. Spirituality**

Your spirituality doesn't have to diminish if you step away from traditional practices. You can explore new ways to connect with God through meditation, nature, service, and cultivating daily moments of awe.

## **14. You Are in the Driver's Seat**

You get to choose your own path and teachers. Seek wisdom widely while choosing teachers who embody humility, compassion, and love rather than fear or anger.

## **15. Rituals**

You can create meaningful rituals in your personal, family, and community life. Rituals sanctify ordinary actions and help you connect more deeply with the divine and with others around you.

## **16. Simplify**

There's a stage where everything feels complex—so many ideas, so much history, so many opinions. Eventually, many find themselves simplifying, focusing on what truly matters to them. You don't have to figure everything out at once. Let yourself breathe and take things one step at a time.

## **17. Inherent Love and Worth**

You have inherent worth simply because you exist—this isn't tied to your performance or obedience. God's love for you is unconditional and was yours before you did anything to earn it.

## **18. Handle the Past With Care**

The grief, loss, regret, and guilt you feel about your past can guide you toward healing and growth. I encourage you to appreciate your journey while letting go of shame—your experiences have shaped who you are today.

## **19. Finding Community**

It can feel isolating to go through a faith transition, especially if most of your community is still in the church. But you're far from alone. Many others have walked this path and found meaningful relationships, new communities, and even deeper connections with family and friends who accept them as they are. There are people who understand and who will support you.

## **20. Flourishing, God, and Questions**

Believe you can flourish through this journey by bringing your big questions to a loving God who wants you to wrestle, wonder, and grow. This may be exactly what God intended for your spiritual development.

## **List of Books and Podcasts**

## Welcome: An Introduction

Welcome! I am so glad you're here.

Months ago, I went through an exercise of assessing where I was in my faith journey. I had already been processing issues with my LDS faith tradition for a few years, and I wanted to check in with myself and see what was working, and what wasn't. (Yes, I am that kind of a person—check lists, reviews, and lots of writing and such).

By some standards, I'd been on a short journey through faith deconstruction, examination, and reconstruction—it had only been a few years. But it had already been profound. It had also often been painful and frustrating to examine truth claims, explore contraries, to manage the emotions that come with change and growth, and never quite know if I was on the right path.

As I examined what I've been through and what I had learned during this difficult, but also wonderfully soul-expanding journey of faith exploration, I recognized that it would help me sort out my feelings if I started writing down much of what I had learned and what others had told me as a way of remembering what I had learned along the way.

Doing so, I began to recognize how lucky I had been to find and receive encouragement on my journey of discovery as well as what I practically learned for myself. As I realized that, what I wrote became more what I wish I had been able to tell myself along the way in the form of encouragement and hope. The result was these letters, intended to be helpful to those who are going through their own faith journey.

Among Jesus' admonitions was a call to seek out and care for those on the margins. Perhaps there is no one feeling more marginalized than those who, viewing their world with new eyes, sit at the edge, wondering how and where they still belong.

Whether you call your experience a faith crisis, faith expansion, a journey, or a loss, nothing can make going through that process easier. It's a very real experience and a path that you have to walk for yourself. That is where the growth is.

However, I hope that along the way you encounter those who are willing to walk some of the path with you. That is what I hope these letters, in some small way, serve.

Thank you for reviewing this very flawed effort. Your experience is every bit as valuable as mine and your feedback in making it better is welcome. Feel free to reach out with comments and suggestions.

I'd also like to expand this to include the voices of others as well. We all experience this journey in different ways. So, if you feel inspired to sell something about what you've learned, or what others should know, please email me your letter at [letters4thejourney@gmail.com](mailto:letters4thejourney@gmail.com) and I'll post it as a guest (I won't include names, only first initial).

If you have come across this and are not going through a faith journey, know that I don't dwell much on or even cover "the issues" that many find difficult with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, it's teachings, or history. That's not my purpose. So, I'd invite you to read these letters as well to better understand and empathize with those going through a faith transition.

Be kind to yourself. Be kind to others.

With all sincerity,

Your friend.

## Letter One: You're Not Wrong, and You're Not Alone

Dear Friend,

I'm writing because I sense that you've been experiencing a shift—in your beliefs, in your faith, in your life.

If I'm wrong, I apologize for sending this. You can crumple it up and throw it away.

But if you've been feeling unsettled, if something inside you has been shifting in ways you can't quite explain, please read on.

I've noticed it but, don't worry—it's not obvious to everyone, except maybe to those who have been through it, like me.

I am writing to you because I've been there. For a long time, I couldn't fully articulate what was happening. In my journal, I kept describing it as tectonic plates of the earth moving—slow, deep, and inevitable. My foundation was shifting, but I didn't really know why.

I wasn't sure what was changing or how much, but I could feel the shift.

I don't know exactly what you are going through. So, I am writing these letters essentially as if they are to me. I can only address what I would have wanted to know when I went through my faith journey. I am sharing them with you in the chance that it will give you some help and a sense of hope.

If you're there, I want you to know this one thing first: You are not alone. Let me support that claim, first with a little data. If you are still in the LDS faith tradition, more people that you might expect around you in the pews every week are going through some of the same questions you are.

Back in 2011 research from the Pew Charitable Trust found that about 22% of members of the LDS church expressed some doubt about the Church's teachings.<sup>1</sup> That's over one in five members!

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<sup>1</sup> A fifth of Mormons express doubts about some church teachings, October 10, 2013, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2013/10/10/a-fifth-of-mormons-express-doubts-about-some-church-teachings/>

But recent data shows a bigger shift in those that question. LDS researcher, journalist, and author Jana Riess and Benjamin Knoll have recently completed a study of members in which they identify a group they call “Liminals” who are somewhere between full orthodoxy and disaffiliation. The individuals may participate in church activities and maintain some level of belief, but they also experience significant doubts or disagreements with church teachings. From their research, Liminals make up about 55% of LDS church members.<sup>2</sup>

So, you're not alone.

As Elder Dieter Uchtdorf observed *“There are few members of the Church who, at one time or another, have not wrestled with serious or sensitive questions.”*

At another time, he reassured young adults, *“We are a question-asking people. We have always been because we know that inquiry leads to truth.”*<sup>3</sup>

Then, he went on to say, *“Some might feel embarrassed or unworthy because they have searching questions regarding the gospel, but they needn't feel that way. Asking questions isn't a sign of weakness. It's a precursor of growth.”*

There you have it: asking questions equals growth.

Now, second, also know this: You've done nothing wrong to be the place you are in. As Elder Uchtdorf says, you're actually at the beginning of a stage of growth.

I may not know exactly what you're feeling, but I have a sense of one part of it. Whatever has brought you to where you are, you've probably said to yourself, *“I used to be so strong in my faith. I knew this, I believed that...and now I don't.”*

Or maybe, *“I still believe, but I've learned something new that contradicts or complicates what I have known.”*

Now, it feels confusing—because it is. And it's a lot to work through.

Oftentimes complication and confusion come with feelings of guilt or shame, like you did something wrong to cause it.

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.instagram.com/mormon.land/reel/DEn0S\\_oBLY7/](https://www.instagram.com/mormon.land/reel/DEn0S_oBLY7/) and <https://www.sltrib.com/religion/2025/01/03/why-people-leave-lds-church-why/> (Paywall).

<sup>3</sup> CES fireside, November 2009



And I am going to be upfront with you: often shame comes from the way leaders and members in the church frame questioning, uncertainty, and doubt as problems. Whether they intend to or not, we come away feeling like we've done something wrong to be sitting here with our questions handling new information that contradicts our previous way of thinking.

So let me take one burden off your shoulders by saying it again: You did not cause this. You didn't do anything wrong. There is nothing wrong with you because you are struggling with questions or doubts.

Do you remember the story of Jacob in the Old Testament? After Jacob wrestles with an angel of God, he asks for a blessing. The angel blesses him and says, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel (Yisra'el), for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed" (Genesis 32:29)

The name Yisra'el means "he struggles with God."

Struggle is in the name.

As I've struggled with questions myself, I eventually found that my unsettled feelings had a name—cognitive dissonance. For me, it was the tension of realizing that what I was seeing didn't always align with the values and beliefs I held deep in my heart. Cognitive dissonance is the discomfort you feel in seeing and holding or witnessing conflicting thoughts, beliefs, or behaviors. That was my tectonic plate shift.

And like you, I needed to understand it. I had to read, to learn, to ask questions—to find clarity.

Maybe that's where you are now. Maybe you've had questions before, but you set them aside.

You've heard hard or surprising things, learned things, and tucked them away in a corner of your mind. And yet, no matter how much you try to move forward, questions keep coming back.

You've even followed Elder Uchtdorf's counsel to doubt your doubts. But that dissonance lingers.

I am not going to tell you all the problems I or others have seen and felt. Like many, your shift possibly started with something someone said that didn't feel right.

Or maybe a child or a friend of yours left the Church, and their journey made you wonder. If so, bless you for your heart is in the right place. You are trying to understand complicated issues.

Maybe you have an LGBTQ+ child, sibling, or friend whom you love dearly, and you're struggling to reconcile that love with the way they've been treated by others. Again, you're blessed for your love and charity.

Perhaps your love for God and Christ is making you question a Church policy or an experience you've had.

Or you've seen historical events in the Church in more detail, and it's left you wondering why it's different from the stories you've heard at Church.

Whatever it is, just start here: Cognitive dissonance is normal—it's a psychological response when things don't match up. And it's natural to seek answers to resolve those feelings. That natural way comes from questioning.

Sometime in my searching, I came to appreciate the wisdom of Elder Hugh Brown:

*"I admire men and women who have developed the questing spirit, who are unafraid of new ideas as stepping stones to progress. We should, of course, respect the opinions of others, but we should also be unafraid to dissent—if we are informed. Thoughts and expressions compete in the marketplace of thought, and in that competition truth emerges triumphant. Only error fears freedom of expression... This free exchange of ideas is not to be deplored as long as men and women remain humble and teachable... We must preserve freedom of the mind in the Church and resist all efforts to suppress it."<sup>4</sup>*

Perhaps you've sought out additional information. You've looked beyond Church sources. That's understandable. No one should fault you for seeking answers. No one should shame you for trying to understand the truth.

This Church was founded on the very premise that those who ask God can receive answers.

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<sup>4</sup> The Sincere Investigator, Hugh B. Brown

Elder Uchtdorf gives us some reassurance, *“Some might ask, ‘But what about my doubts?’ It’s natural to have questions—the acorn of honest inquiry has often sprouted and matured into a great oak of understanding.”*

If you’re in that place now, please don’t let anyone make you feel guilty for being here. For seeking, for learning. You are here, at this moment, because of good intentions. Because you value truth.

I am sure that you’ve felt enough of the struggle to know that no one would choose to feel what you’ve felt. Who would choose dissonance and uncertainty? Your goal has been to resolve those feelings, and that’s what causes pain. You’ll hopefully find that’s what causes growth as well.

So don’t let guilt or fear make those struggles worse. As church historian and author Melissa Inouye once said, “Struggle is a feature, not a bug.”<sup>5</sup>

So don’t fret the struggle.

And most importantly, know you are not alone.

If you’re interested, I’ve written some additional letters that I am happy to share with you. I won’t answer any specific questions or address thorny issues. There is plenty of that to be found elsewhere.

Each letter is simply designed to help you to recognize that what you’re feeling on your journey is normal and help you on your path. They come from what I myself have learned, and from the wisdom and counsel that I was lucky enough to hear from others. They are just designed to reassure you, not point you in any one direction.

I also take pains to not raise any additional doubts for you or open up more issues for you. That’s not my goal.

Importantly, I don’t have answers for you to get through this faster or provide you with a simple “10 step plan” to get through this. I don’t think that’s productive or even realistic. Each person is on their own journey and it’s better to find your way in your own time.

My goal is just to help you know a few things along your journey, wherever that leads you.

Because it’s your journey.

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<sup>5</sup> Melissa Inouye, Sacred Struggle

So, wherever you are on that journey, take a minute to pause. Take a deep breath and feel that you are loved. You are important.

Speaking of journey, feel free to move on to letter two when you are ready.

With warmth,

Your Friend

P.S. In case you are wondering where I have come through on all of this. I will tell you this: I am still on the journey, just as you are. I believe in God, a Heavenly Father, and a Heavenly Mother, and I believe and trust in the example of Jesus Christ. In the process of re-examining my faith I have found that they are more loving and kinder than I had ever before felt. I don't have all the answers that I thought I once needed to have, and I am very much okay with that.

## Letter Two: This is Your Journey

Hi Friend,

I'm really glad you're back. I've been excited for you to read this because I really want to tell you something that I hope will help.

You can call whatever you are feeling whatever you want. Some people call it a faith crisis which can be described as *“a period of doubt or questioning of one's beliefs, that often leads to feelings of confusion, grief, and a sense of disconnection from God or one's faith community.”*

I pulled that straight from a Google search, but it's pretty spot on. The only thing I might add is that there can be a lot of pain, isolation, loneliness, even despair that comes from it. I've personally felt all of those.

For some reason, I could never bring myself to call it a crisis. I don't know why. I didn't know what to call it. I just knew that what once felt certain now felt...unsettled. I kept thinking, *“If this is the truth, why does it feel so complicated?”*

And every time I learned something new that contradicted long-held beliefs, it was like another knot in a ball of yarn, another thread unraveling, just as I was trying to wind it back up again.

What once felt neat and organized now felt tangled and frayed.

It took me a long time to find the right term for it all until I finally understood that I wasn't standing in a crisis—I was walking on a journey.

I first heard it termed as a journey from Father Richard Rohr, a well-known Franciscan priest and author who has written extensively about spirituality. He often highlights that we are on a spiritual journey, and references the Hero's Journey, the idea that most stories have a similar path to them (think Star Wars, Harry Potter, Homer, and now you.)

He credits this idea to writer and professor Joseph Campbell, who wrote about the idea of the Hero's Journey we often find in literature and scripture. He describes how every hero (or heroine) hears a call that pulls them out of the world they once knew.

Sometimes, that heroine refuses it at first. They don't want to leave behind what's familiar. Who would? It's uncomfortable here!

But eventually, they get called again and, reluctantly, they step forward into the unknown. And that's when the real journey begins.

If that's where you are, I hope you will accept it as a journey.

Why a journey? Because you're going somewhere with this, wherever "this" is. And it's yours and yours alone. No one else can take it for you. No one else will experience it exactly as you do. You might find people who have walked a similar path, and their stories might resonate. But in the end, this is *your* journey, and it will unfold in *your* way.

As I dug deeper into this concept, I found this quote by Joseph Campbell, who applied the Hero's Journey to us in a way that excited me. He said, "We must be willing to let go of the life we planned so as to have the life that is waiting for us."

Afterwards, I wrote in my journal, "The idea that I am on a journey is both enabling and empowering for me. It wasn't really one I chose. And I realize now that I refused it for years until I could no longer ignore it."

One of the ways this idea is enabling is in recognizing that to make this journey I can leave things behind. I always struggle with the urge to overpack for any trip. On this journey, I decide what to take with me.

The other way this is enabling is realizing that this isn't just any journey, it's an epic journey. It's likely to last a lifetime as I figure it out. That somehow feels more interesting than sitting at home 'enduring to the end.'"

I'll probably never get back to a home that looked like it did before—fixed, certain, and unchanging, nor would I fit in that place. It's good to visit, but it never quite looks the same.

Whatever has led you here, it may feel like a quiet feeling that won't go away, for it is your calling to step outside of what you once knew. That can be terrifying. For a long time, I resisted. I told myself I had all the right answers, that I just needed to hold on tighter. But eventually, I couldn't ignore it anymore.

The idea that this is a journey—rather than a crisis—has been freeing for me. It tells me I am heading somewhere and becoming something.

Of course, just because it's a journey doesn't mean it's easy. I think that's because it's not about the destination as it is the act of learning as we travel. Melissa Inouye, who recently passed away after a long struggle with cancer, wrote,

*"Trying to have a trouble-free life would miss the whole point of life. The purpose of life is to explore opposition and contrasts, and to struggle to love without pride or selfishness. Challenging and even devastating incidents are not a waste of time or effort because they stretch our experience to fit the reality of the cosmos as it really is."*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Melissa Inouye, Sacred Struggle

As I wrote more in my journal about being on a journey, I made one realization about my journey: I get to decide what to carry with me. I don't have to take everything. I can set things down. I can travel lighter.

Traveling lighter does not necessarily make the journey easier. No, I can testify of that through my own experience. The very fact that we have reluctantly gone down this path is because we knew that the journey would be hard. But traveling lighter does mean that you decide what to take with you.

I still remind myself of that today—I'm still on the journey, and sometimes I need to take something out of my backpack and leave it at the side of the road. At other times, I pick up something new and helpful to bring along.

Importantly, a journey is a great metaphor because it involves movement. It means growth. It means you, and I, won't be stuck in one place forever.

It also means coming to accept that we may never return to the same home we left behind. When we go away and change, home doesn't feel the same.

You've probably felt that if you've ever gone away, say to college or moving for a job, and left home. You changed with your new experiences. And because you changed, home felt a bit different when you came back.

The poet T.S. Eliot, who famously coined this in his poem, "Little Gidding": "We shall not cease from exploration, *and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.*"

Maybe that's part of the journey—not returning exactly to where we were but discovering something new. A home that is bigger, more expansive, fuller of love and grace. A place where we can be fully ourselves.

So, if you're feeling lost, if you're wondering where this road leads, just know this about your journey: It's not a detour. It's the path.

And I believe that where it leads will be worth it.

Journeys can be transformative. For us, and for where we call home.

If it all sounds scary, I can tell you that you can find comfort along the way. We'll talk about that another time.

With warmth,

Your Friend

P.S. I am going to recommend some things to you that you may or may not want to read along the way. Here are three from LDS authors, and the one by Father Richard Rohr. There is no need to read all or any of them—this is a long list. This is your journey, so you take what you want with you.

You will find a much longer list of books and podcasts at the end of these letters for you to explore.

*Planted: Belief and Belonging in an Age of Doubt* by Patrick Q. Mason. This book addresses the challenges of doubt from an LDS perspective and offers encouragement for those navigating uncertainty

*The Crucible of Doubt: Reflections on the Quest for Faith*, by Terryl and Fiona Givens. This book explores how doubt can be a refining experience rather than a crisis. The authors present ways to reconcile questions with faith and offer historical and philosophical perspectives on belief.

*Letters to a Young Mormon* Adam S. Miller. This is a short, reflective book that provides a compassionate and philosophical approach to faith, doubt, and growth in an LDS context.

*Falling Upward: A Spirituality for Two Halves of Life* by Richard Rohr. I'd recommend this book to anyone as maybe the most important book to read for your journey. It shows us that falling down is the real path to finding up in our spiritual life.



## Letter Three: Finding Assurances on your Journey

Hi Friend,

I'm really glad you're here again. If you're still reading, it probably means this journey is real for you. And maybe, like me, you've had moments of wondering if you're doing it *right* or if you're even on the right path at all.

I get it.

When everything feels uncertain, it's natural to look for something—anything—to hold onto. Some kind of reassurance that you're not completely lost. Maybe you're asking, *Am I making a mistake? Am I being deceived? Will I ever feel at peace again?*

Those questions used to keep me up at night and absorb my thoughts all day. I really wanted someone to tell me it was all going to be okay. That if I kept going, I wouldn't lose everything. But no one could do that for me.

Instead, I had to learn to find small assurances along the way.

One of the most comforting realizations for me was understanding that this process—the questions, the doubts, the unraveling—was not unique to me. It's not a personal failing or a sign that I've gone astray.

In fact, what you're experiencing is actually *well-documented*. People have studied it, written about it, and many have walked this path long before you or I.

But this hasn't just happened to members of the LDS faith, and it isn't just recently, which is why psychologists, theologians, and scholars have long mapped out models of faith development that describe what you and I are experiencing. This dates as far back as John's description of Thomas' doubts over Jesus' resurrection. (Thomas gets a bad rap, BTW.)

Of those who have documented faith transitions, the most well-known is James Fowler's *Stages of Faith*. His research shows that faith isn't static—it evolves over time. We grow into it, out of it, and sometimes through it again in different ways.

At one point, faith feels simple, clear, and certain—built on authority, tradition, and a sense of belonging. But for many of us, that stage gives way to complexity. We start asking harder questions, recognizing contradictions, and seeking truth in new ways.

That can feel unsettling, even lonely. But it's not *wrong*. It's part of a larger human experience.

A well-known former pastor and author, Brian McLaren outlined a similar model of faith as a journey that helps describe how people navigate doubt and grow their faith.

I like Brian's model because, while similar to Fowler's model, it's simplified to four stages. They are:

1. **Simplicity** – People see faith in black-and-white terms, with clear right and wrong, us versus them. Authority figures provide answers, and questioning is discouraged. This stage is often associated with early religious instruction or fundamentalist belief systems. It may also be seen in the younger years of our lives.
2. **Complexity** – Faith evolves to embrace problem-solving and pragmatism. People start seeing that life and faith require strategies and techniques. They may still see faith as a system to help them succeed in life but begin to recognize nuance. They start thinking in terms of steps, and achievements in their spiritual lives.
3. **Perplexity** – Doubt starts to play a central role as people question previously held beliefs. They see contradictions in religious institutions and may feel disillusioned. Many move away from organized religion at this stage, seeing it as hypocritical or inadequate in addressing their struggles. Others press on, trying to reconcile their beliefs and new information.
4. **Harmony** – At this stage, instead of resisting doubt, people start to integrate doubt and mystery into their faith. This stage embraces love as the central principle of faith, allowing for a more open, inclusive, and holistic spirituality. People move beyond rigid dogma and toward a more compassionate, connected faith experience.

Brian McLaren's model tries to show that faith development is a process that involves movement between stages rather than a linear progression. These stages aren't better or higher than another; they are stages in how we process and embrace faith in real and deeper ways as we recognize that things are more complex than we previously thought.

This takes us back to that idea of the Hero's Journey for many spiritual journeys begin with a "call to adventure" that disrupts everything we thought we knew. Often, we resist

it. But once we step into the unknown, we meet guides, face trials, and emerge transformed.

Elder Jeffrey Holland echoes this sentiment of a journey when he said, “Don’t give up. Don’t you quit. You keep walking. You keep trying. There is help and happiness ahead—a lot of it.”

My point is that what you’re going through is *not* you being lost. It’s you on a journey. And while it may not feel like it, that’s actually a well-documented process of growth.

In fact, we could say that everyone is at some stage of this journey. They just haven’t accepted the call.

This is important because I think, like a toddler, we need assurances that it’s okay to step forward as we learn to walk. I used to think assurances had to come as big, undeniable moments—like an angel appearing or a voice telling me exactly what to do.

But that’s not how it’s worked for me on this path of faith exploration. Instead, I’ve found that assurance often comes in quiet, unexpected ways that mean that my faith is growing and changing in different ways than I expected.

Some of those assurances for me have included:

- The deep feeling of relief in realizing I’m *allowed* to ask questions (maybe not in gospel doctrine class).
- A moment of clarity when I read something that puts words to what I’ve been feeling.
- The kindness of a friend who doesn’t judge but simply listens.
- The realization that my sense of goodness, love, and truth still matter, even when everything else feels uncertain.
- A deeper feeling of the unconditional love of God while on the path. (I love this!)

I’ve started to see these moments as markers along the path—small but steady reminders that I am still moving forward, still growing, still held in something greater than myself.

If you’re looking for assurances, I can tell you this: they will not come all at once and they might not look the way you expect. But they *will* come. And when they do, they’ll remind you that you are not lost. You are on the journey to becoming something new.

One of the hardest but most freeing lessons I've learned is that I don't need to have all the answers to keep going. I don't need certainty to have faith. Faith, I've realized, includes trusting that the journey itself has meaning—even when I don't know exactly where it's leading.

I found these words from Rachel Held Evans reassuring:

“Faith isn't about having everything figured out ahead of time; faith is about following the quiet voice of God without having everything figured out ahead of time.”<sup>1</sup>

So, if you're feeling unsteady, if you're waiting for some kind of assurance, I hope you'll start to notice the small moments, and know you are on a common path with many other travelers. Yet, it's distinctly your own.

And know, as former General Young Women's President Susan Tanner said, “He is aware of you, and He loves you—right now, just as you are.”<sup>2</sup>

That means wherever you are.

Enjoy the unexpected insight. Embrace the knowledge that this just might be part of the plan. Those things count.

And so do you.

With Warmth,

Your Friend.

P.S.

I have only one recommendation today, the book *Faith After Doubt: Why Your Beliefs Stopped Working and What to Do About It*, by Brian McLaren. In it, he discusses doubt as a normal and necessary part of spiritual growth, offering a framework that moves from simplicity to complexity, then to harmony.

Here's a short story to go with it. I saw this book on the new books shelf at the public library when I was first starting to question (or when I began my faith journey.. I thought that maybe it would be helpful in my quest, so I borrowed it, but I couldn't bring myself to read it (Remember turning down that first call to the hero's journey?)

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<sup>1</sup> Rachel Held Evans, *A Year of Biblical Womanhood*

<sup>2</sup> “Did I Tell You...?” Susan Tanner, General Conference, April 2003

Essentially, I couldn't accept that by reading it, I was acknowledging that I had any doubts. I was a bit embarrassed that I even borrowed it, so it sat in the middle of my pile of library books until I returned it.

About a year or so later when I could no longer deny my journey, I remembered the book and I bought a copy. I'm really glad I did because Brian's thoughtful approach shed a lot of light on my journey. I have read it several times since then.

Of course, anything that I recommend to you is just that, a recommendation. You don't need to read any of my suggestions.

## Letter Four: Journeys Take Time

Hi Friend,

I'm glad you're still reading these. I want to talk about two important things you need for this journey you're on: time and patience.

If you're anything like me, you might feel a sense of urgency that you need to just hurry up and figure everything out. You want clarity now, answers, and a sense of peace now! Sound familiar?

The discomfort of uncertainty can make us feel like we're stranded in the middle of nowhere, longing to get somewhere—anywhere—with solid ground beneath our feet.

That manifested itself in so many ways for me. I would spend long nights studying new topics. I would pick up and read any book that someone recommended. And I've listened to podcasts, literally thousands of hours of podcasts.

No matter how much I studied and listened, it felt like I just wasn't moving fast enough. I wasn't learning enough.

But then, I learned something along the way: this process takes time. You can't rush it!

Faith transitions don't happen overnight. They unfold over months, years, and even decades. And they don't follow a straight, predictable path. You might feel moments of certainty, only to find yourself questioning again. You can feel peace one day and anger the next. Some days you just want to run back to what you once knew, and other days, you might feel ready to leave it all behind.

That's normal.

I think it's pretty normal to be frustrated as well. Especially as a Latter-Day Saint.

We've lived with the idea of a strait and narrow path. We've been immersed in this concept of enduring to the end—like we are already on the right path, it's all resolved, and now we just need to ride it out (which is not exactly what that means, but we've treated it that way.). Then, everything gets disrupted, and we just want to get back on that path. And that makes us impatient.

The faith models we discussed last time like Fowler's *Stages of Faith* describe how people move through belief, doubt, and reconstruction. But they emphasize that we move in cycles, not in a straight line. You may revisit the same questions at different times, seeing them with fresh eyes as you continue to grow. There's no right or wrong stage to be in.

This kind of searching has been part of the human experience for centuries. Many of the most faithful people in history wrestled with doubt for years—sometimes even for a lifetime.

That's hard for our kind of people. We are used to checklists, to-do's and being rewarded for doing things on time. Most of our goals have been time based: making it to Primary, then Young Men's/Women's, moving on the Relief Society or the Melchizedek priesthood, going on a mission, attending the temple, getting married, children, senior mission, etc. We have all been on timelines. We are the champions at on-time delivery.

But there's no such thing here on the journey. There is no checklist. No 10-point plan.

We have so many examples of this, I am surprised it's not obvious.

One of the most well-known descriptions of a long, difficult faith journey is *The Dark Night of the Soul* by St. John of the Cross. He describes a time of spiritual emptiness, where the presence of God feels distant or absent. It's painful, disorienting, and lonely—but it's also a crucial part of deep spiritual growth.

Mother Teresa, one of the most revered religious figures of our time, experienced this herself. Her private writings, later published in *Come Be My Light*, reveal that she felt spiritually lost for nearly 50 years! She described an aching absence where she once felt God's closeness. And yet, she remained faithful, continuing her work even when she felt no reassurance.

If someone as devoted as Mother Teresa could struggle for decades, you can be gentle with yourself as you figure things out. It's clear that God is not in a hurry to just pull us out of our faith journey.

Think about how long it took to build your beliefs in the first place. Years, maybe decades. They shaped how you saw the world, how you made decisions, how you found meaning. Changing or reshaping those beliefs is not something that happens quickly.

No one is waiting for you to "hurry up and get there." Certainly not God, who let the Israelites wander for forty years.

I can only speculate why God doesn't feel the need to pull us through this in a hurry. For me, as an imperfect parent, I don't like to see my children go through difficult times. It pains me. But I also don't want to shield my children from difficult experiences. As much as I want to help them, I know that if I did, they would miss out on some real growth.

And I think that's why God is patient. He has time, because time is what we need.

I know that's not reassuring when you are going through your own dark night of the soul.

Those emotions are hard, but they are also telling you something. Each, whether it's grief, pain, relief, sadness, or excitement, is telling you what you need to hear. So, if you have time, stop and listen to what they are saying.

The poet Rainer Maria Rilke offers us this encouragement,

*"Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves... Live the questions now. Perhaps you will gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer."*

Can you feel the lack of urgency in that quote? Live the questions now...just let them sit with you. And gradually you'll live along some distant day into the answer. That's patience.

In contrast, when I hear the phrase "endure to the end," I feel like it's a call to just hold on, grit my teeth, and push through. To be honest, it has always sounded painful.

But now, I think about enduring differently—not as this long, tedious trek until I die. Instead, I think about enduring as not rushing toward a conclusion, but as making space for the process.

Enduring isn't about racing toward certainty. It's about giving yourself permission to take the time you need.

There's no perfect timeline for faith, no final exam to pass, no finish line you need to cross by a certain date. You're not behind. You're exactly where you need to be.

Give yourself permission to be patient. Give yourself permission to set some things aside. You won't solve your concerns all at once. And give yourself permission to keep asking questions.

Maybe asking questions is what Christ meant by becoming a little child. In the words Rachel Held Evans, *"Those who say that having childlike faith means not asking questions haven't met too many children."*<sup>1</sup>

I hope you'll be patient with yourself. Keep going at your own pace. The road ahead isn't about speed—it's about learning to walk it well.

I'm here with you.

With warmth,

Your Friend

P.S. If you want to think further about this topic, here are a few options for you to read:

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<sup>1</sup> Rachel Held Evans, *Evolving in Monkeytown*



*Letter to a Doubter*, by Terryl Givens. A direct letter from the renowned LDS scholar (who now heads the BYU Maxwell Institute) to address doubts of LDS members.

*The Dark Night of the Soul*, by St. John of the Cross. A classic text that describes a period of deep spiritual struggle and transformation, emphasizing that this journey can take years but leads to deeper faith.

*Come Be My Light*, by Mother Teresa. Mother Teresa's private writings reveals her decades-long struggle with spiritual emptiness, offering reassurance that even the most faithful experience long periods of doubt.

## Letter Five: More Questions than Answers

Hi Friend,

I hope you've had time to reflect on what I wrote last time about allowing your journey to take as much time as needed. Perhaps it has allowed you to extend patience to yourself in the process.

If you have, here is another patience test: In your search for answers, you will likely find *far* more questions than certainties.

Let's explore this starting with knowing. As Latter-day Saints, we use the word "know" a lot. We often say it in place of words like hope, believe, think, or having faith.

Whether we mean to or not, we elevate "knowing" as the highest form of belief. To many— if not most— in our religious tradition, it represents certainty, and anything less can feel insufficient. Further, we hold the common belief that all principles, doctrines, and answers are knowable, and that truth is always spelled with a big capital T.

That kind of certainty can feel really secure—until it doesn't. And it can become unsettling when we encounter more to the story than we previously understood or when facts aren't as clear-cut as we once thought. In those moments, the word "know" can start to feel less welcoming to us personally.

Eventually, the expectation of knowing may feel burdensome—especially when we are often told there is a specific set of things we should "know."

This idea of knowing specific things was evident in a talk by Elder Gary Stevenson in a General Conference talk in which he said a testimony should include five elements:

1. "God is your Heavenly Father; you are His child. He loves you.
2. Jesus Christ lives. He is the Son of the living God and your Savior and Redeemer.
3. Joseph Smith is a prophet of God called to restore the Church of Jesus Christ.
4. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is God's restored Church on the earth.
5. The restored Church of Jesus Christ is led by a living prophet today."

Of course, accepting those five things presupposes that you "know" many other things as well.

If you're like me, you have probably borne testimony of knowing these and many other things throughout your life—the Book of Mormon, the First Vision, the priesthood, modern revelation, and so on.

Now, as you navigate your faith journey, you may have questions about some of them.

At first, that was really hard for me. I was so accustomed to knowing that, when I encountered difficult truths, my instinct was to regain my certainty—to “know” all the answers again. Without that knowledge, I felt diminished, like I was losing ground. I wanted to progress again—get back to knowing.

When you no longer feel certain, you may find others in the Church are focus on returning you to knowing everything on that list. They will advise you to do what they believe will help: pray more, study the scriptures more, fast more, repent, attend the temple more.

That's great if that counsel works for you. But in my experience, I don't know many people who, after encountering difficult questions, have prayed, studied, or fasted their way back to their old testimony.

Even more challenging, you may find yourself caught in the never-ending study cycle when you learn about a difficult topic, which leads you to another and another, until you start uncovering more and more troubling questions—about history, doctrine, leadership, changes over time, complex figures and so on. Soon you are jumping from one issue to another, adding layers of complexity and uncertainty to your faith experience.

With each topic, you begin a new cycle: encountering difficult information, trying to understand it, reading and listening to podcasts, wrestling with tough emotions—only to leave it unresolved before moving on to the next concern.

I've been there. It was painful, constantly moving from one unsettling topic to another. Sleepless nights. Waking the next morning tired and depleted.

And it really has the possibility of never ending. You will always find more questions than answers.

If you're struggling with this, let me offer three suggestions that helped me break that loop and move forward in a healthier way.

1. Start with what you believe.

Don't start finding what you "know." Just start with what you still believe. Inconclusive. Not quite sure. Sit with what you feel comfortable believing.

Many of us, me included, feel the need to find firm footing on everything. Some things—including those five testimony elements—you might still feel an inherent belief in. Start there. You don't have to prove them. Just acknowledge that you believe them. And if you don't believe any of them, that's okay too. That's where you are.

For me, recognizing what I still believed was a turning point. In my confusion over what was true, I realized that while I couldn't say I *knew* anymore, I could still choose to *believe*. For me, that meant believing in God and in the Savior Jesus Christ. Period. I choose to believe.

That became my foundation. It doesn't have to be rock solid. Here's why I know that.

Do you remember the story in Mark 9:23-24 of the man who brought his son to Jesus to be healed? As he pleaded with the Savior for help, we get this remarkable insight into how willing God is to work with us:

"Jesus said unto him, If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth.

"And straightway the father of the child cried out, and said with tears, Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief."

And with that humble request and admission—"help thou mine unbelief"—the Savior healed his son.

God blesses us even when we don't *know*. He is even willing to work with your unbelief.

2. When something troubling arises, check in with yourself before reacting.

If you're like I was, your instinct might be to jump straight into the never-ending study cycle with every new troubling topic. I used to stay up late reading, verifying sources, and bingeing podcasts to get more information. I did it. On. Every. Single. Topic.

It wasn't always productive. Oh, I *learned* a lot. But it didn't *help* me process what I was going through. In fact, it often led to me layering on more things to process.

Now, when I encounter something new that challenges me, I pause and say, "That's interesting." Then, I ask myself: *Will diving into this help me right now?*

If not, I write it down on a list. Notable, but not urgent.

3. Know your own "why."

Last, when you feel the need to study something and begin asking more questions, ask yourself why? Why do you want to study this right now? What is your motivation for seeking more information? Is it to:

- Gain deeper understanding on an important topic? (ask yourself why? again)
- Fuel frustration and resentment? (been there)
- Strengthen your faith? (often not)
- Draw closer to God? (occasionally)

If you're feeling hurt or angry, is researching yet another topic going to help? If you already have enough information to make a decision about your faith or the Church, will digging into more historical fact, doctrinal change, human error, or policy change anything?

At some point, you have to ask yourself why you're asking more questions. And while you're at it, ask if those questions are helping.

At some point in my continual studies, I realized I was hurting myself by endlessly seeking more answers and trying to discern what was “big T” True.

Too often, I was trying to deconstruct everything and realized that I needed to switch gears. It was time to start to rebuild—to reconstruct some belief and nourish my part of my faith still existed. I was looking to put some meaning back into my life, and creating a sense of purpose in my questions was a logical part of it.

I am assuming that since you have come along this far, your goal is to find some meaning, find something you might still believe as well.

So, for me, that sense making towards creating a life of meaning and purpose became my new *why*. From then on, when new issues arose, I reminded myself that while they were interesting, they didn't have to be my focus right now. I chose to continue believing in God, and I would concentrate on what built me up and drew me closer to Them.

I'm not saying that has to be *your* why. I am suggesting that you find your own why—and let it guide you.

And know that it's okay to not know everything. You may gain more certainty over time. Or perhaps more likely you may simply learn to walk in uncertainty.

With warmth,

Your Friend

P.S. Here are a few additional books that may help you out on your journey through questions.

*Navigating Mormon Faith Crisis* by Thomas McConkie. This is a mindfulness-based approach to dealing with faith transitions. As a daily practitioner of mindfulness, this resonates with me and helps me to take a more contemplative approach.

*Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis. A classic exploration of Christian belief and reasoned faith.

*Benefit of the Doubt: Breaking the Idol of Certainty* by Gregory A. Boyd. This book challenges the idea that faith requires certainty and argues that trust in God can coexist with deep questions.

*The Sin of Certainty: Why God Desires Our Trust More Than Our "Correct" Beliefs* by Peter Enns explores the idea that faith is not about having unwavering theological certainty, but about trusting God even in the midst of doubt, change, and ambiguity.

## **Letter Six: Hurt, Healing, and Peace.**

Dear Friend,

It's time to talk about a special and sensitive set of interrelated topics: hurt, healing, and peace.

If you've experienced a shift in faith, you are probably feeling pain and hurt. That is natural and that pain is telling you something.

I've heard it said many times that the deeper your conviction was, the deeper your hurt and the harder your deconstruction.

I don't have anything to compare my pain to, but the best way I can explain it is as a heartache. It has been more than I'd like to go through. And I can recognize that no one knows what it's like until they've gone through it for themselves.

The pain of learning new truths is hard enough, but there are many additional pains that can come with those realizations. I have felt them, the pain of feeling deceived, sadness, anger, confusion, loss, loneliness, and grief.

I wish there were a way to avoid it or lessen the pain. But I think it comes as a part of any change in our worldview. It's the pain of undoing what we've held onto so tightly.

My hope is that no matter how hard the pain, you feel that there is light ahead as you are able to start on a path to renewal.

I hope that you can find your own way of healing.

At one point in my journey, I encountered a quote from the poet Rumi which filled me with joy in finding the right approach. Speaking of hope to the wounded, he said, "The wound is the place where the light enters you."

That really sunk deep in my heart, suggesting that our painful experiences are the very pathways through which we can find understanding, growth, and transformation. It opens us up to finding something bigger than we have experienced before.

To me, it's a necessary part of balancing the pain and hurt to ask the question, what inspires and nourishes you? Whatever it is, spend time pursuing it because it brings you healing.

Maybe it's art, walks in nature, meditation, reading, philosophy, music, or deep conversations. Find what brings you joy and sparks curiosity and pursue it.

You don't need to have everything figured out to start filling your life with meaning again.

With that, let's address a real challenge to your healing.

It's this: Like anyone who has been hurt, you may wish that those who caused pain would ask for forgiveness.

You are, quite frankly, not going to hear much asking forgiveness from leaders, or anyone in the church.

I could theorize why. For one, I think that protecting the institution is a very natural urge from those who lead the church, and the value of that protection sometimes overwrites the concerns and feelings of individuals. In their own minds, they are protecting what they see is the greater good.

That's why I appreciate the effort expressed in this quote from Elder Dieter Uchtdorf, who makes at least an attempt to acknowledge wrongs in the past. He said this back in 2013,

"We openly acknowledge that in nearly 200 years of church history — along with an uninterrupted line of inspired, honorable and divine events — there have been some things said and done that could cause people to question.

"To be perfectly frank," he said, "there have been times when members or leaders in the church have simply made mistakes. There may have been things said or done that were not in harmony with our values, principles or doctrine."<sup>1</sup>

Another, less sensitive comment by a church leader was that the church neither gives nor seeks for apologies.

Despite the church's approach, I would encourage you to consider forgiveness, even in the absence of an apology, for one simple reason.

I think that Mark Twain says it best, *"Forgive others, not because they deserve forgiveness, but because you deserve peace."*

Don't base your healing on what you hear from others. You deserve to feel peace.

With warmth,

Your Friend

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<sup>1</sup> Come, Join with Us, Elder Dieter Uchtdorf, October 2013.



## Letter Seven: Feeling Tension

Hi Friend,

I recently came across some research that sparked this letter so I could share it with you. It was a survey of Latter-Day Saints who had begun to take a more expansive view of their faith.<sup>2</sup>

As I listened to a podcast covering the research, one word came up repeatedly to explain what people were feeling: tension.

The author of the survey explained that those who find themselves in this liminal space—between what they once believed and what they are coming to believe—often feel tension between two conflicting sides.

That struck a chord with me because I have felt that same tension.

Faith transitions bring a flood of emotions: confusion, betrayal, anger, grief, relief, and even joy.

These emotions are natural, and valid. And it's important to learn to read and understand these emotions and live with tension.

These emotions are signals. They are a way for your brain to tell you something, revealing the depth of your experience and what matters most to you. Because of that, those feelings aren't right or wrong. They just are, and they are part of you.

So, give yourself permission to feel them fully rather than suppressing or dismissing them. In other words, it's okay to be angry, to grieve, to feel confused. And it's okay to feel more than one emotion at a time.

I have personally experienced them all. And of them all, heartache or grief was probably the most profound and deep. Some of the things I learned didn't make me angry. They made me sad, like a part of me had gone missing. I missed what I used to think, what behaviors those thoughts and beliefs caused me to be and do, and the feeling of surety that I felt.

And I felt that deeply for a while.

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<sup>2</sup> Faith Matters Podcast, The Ongoing Tug-of-War Between Tradition and Change—A Conversation with Jeff Strong.

So, if you are feeling any of those emotions, and that tension, I want you to know that it's normal.

It took me some time to understand how much tension I was feeling and that at times, being in this in-between space was creating different emotions. That tension came from being pulled by any number of different, often opposing forces. It's part of the deconstruction process.

Some tension-creating forces might feel like:

- Certainty vs. Uncertainty
- Tradition vs. Change
- Belief vs. Skepticism
- Authority vs. Personal Conscience
- Community vs. Individuality
- Spiritual Experience vs. Intellectual Understanding
- Faithfulness vs. Authenticity
- Obedience vs. Freedom of Choice
- Wrathful God vs. Loving God
- Literalism vs. Symbolism
- Sacred vs. Secular
- Hope vs. Disillusionment
- Past Identity vs. Emerging Identity
- Historical Stories vs. Facts

Some tensions aren't just contrasts but contradictions we hold at the same time:

- Being among people and feeling alone
- Seeing goodness in people while also sensing the potential for harm
- Feeling love for family and loved ones while struggling with their beliefs or teachings
- Valuing principles while wrestling with institutional challenges

Some contrasts we even see in our own church teachings and history. Can scripture be both flawed and inspiring? How can Joseph Smith be known for both good and evil, as Moroni says?

Do any of these feel tensions familiar? If so, understand that they are signals, revealing the depth of your experience and what matters to you.

Importantly, tension can be a way to find truth. There is lots of wisdom in the statement from Joseph Smith that: "By proving contraries, truth is made manifest."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Joseph Smith, in History of the Church, 6:428.

One thing I've learned is that even though something is uncomfortable doesn't mean I need to make it go away. I can recognize it, feel it, and allow myself to sit with it.

So, give yourself permission to feel them fully—not to suppress, dismiss them or fuel them, or even try to understand them. Just know that those tensions will exist and it's okay.

The Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh advocates the peaceful approach we can all do better in observing,

*"In us, there is a river of feelings, in which every drop of water is a different feeling, and each feeling relies on all the others for its existence. To observe it, we just sit on the bank of the river and identify each feeling as it surfaces, flows by, and disappears."*

For me, journaling and mindfulness have helped me sit with those feelings, express them, and learn to feel them and understand why I felt them. I was also able to find others to speak with, including some people that could help me.

I am not a mental health professional. But I know that suppressing those feelings, or continuing to fuel them, is not healthy physically or mentally. So, find what helps you to process those emotions.

Also know that you may need help with this. If you feel the need, I encourage you to find a mental health professional, a faith transition coach, or someone you know that has gone through a similar faith journey to just sit with you.

I hope you know that you are capable of holding those tensions. It can be your new superpower.

With warmth,

Your Friend

P.S. One of the greatest treasures I have found on this spiritual journey is adopting a practice of mindfulness, that is an ability to just be present with everything I am experiencing. That term may seem a bit out there for you; consider it a form of pondering that has very clear health benefits. One of the most important is the ability to sit with feelings and be present in those feelings, including tension.

I had started a mindfulness practice due to work-related stress before my faith journey, and I have found that it helps me with every part of my life. If you want to try it, there are plenty of phone apps, podcasts, and YouTube channels to help you get started. You

may also want to try Thomas McConkie's podcast *One Heart, One Mind*, where he blends mindfulness into a setting of LDS beliefs.

One of the books I highly recommend to adopt a more peaceful mindset is *Peace Is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life* by Thich Nhat Hanh.

## Letter Eight: Protecting Yourself

Dear Friend,

I hope you're doing well and have found some reassurance since our last conversation about tension.

With that conversation in mind, I want to offer a word of caution as you move forward: please protect yourself.

It's natural that, as you continue your faith journey—developing more questions than answers, learning new facts about the Church, or seeing things in a new light—you'll want to talk about it. I mentioned last time that it could be helpful in many circumstances to find a mental health professional, a faith transition coach, or someone who has been through the experience before to talk to.

They are good options depending on your needs and can provide different support. They are also a safe group.

Here is my caution: I would encourage you though to proceed with care in sharing your story with anyone else outside of those who can provide emotional safety.

Be mindful about sharing your story. First, your journey is deeply personal, and your experiences are precious.

Second, not everyone will be ready or willing to hear what you've learned. Some may not be in a place to receive it, no matter how well-intentioned you are. And those who you most trust with everything else may be the least safe in sharing your changing beliefs.

Before sharing with, take a moment to reflect on your motivations:

- Are you hoping to help others understand what you now understand?
- Do you want to process what you've learned and gain their perspective?
- Are you seeking an emotional release?

Even if none of these motivations are conscious, you may find that some—or all—apply.

Recognize that the Church has a very explicit script that's been developed for people who have questions and doubts. We may not realize it because it's masked as a concern for the person.

It's the script about being deceived. You will hear it clearly about anyone questioning, and it's often tied to judgment about sinning or unworthiness.

It's a defensive mechanism that Latter-Day Saints have been taught. And you may encounter it, even from the people you love. So, be cautious.

I am not trying to discourage you from talking to anyone. I just want you to know that that script exists, and people will naturally pull it out and use it without thinking about it.

Although you may have a spouse, a close friend, or someone you always confide in, be mindful of how and what you share, both for your own well-being and theirs. There are others who have gone through faith transitions and who understand what you're experiencing. Thankfully, they (hopefully) haven't approached you with information that could have been difficult for you to hear. Imagine how you would have felt if they had, even if they had the best intentions.

If you need a space to process your thoughts and emotions, consider alternatives like journaling, quiet contemplation (mindfulness), listening to thoughtful podcasts, or online forums that foster healthy, meaningful discussions—especially those within the Latter-day Saint community that encourage exploration and understanding.

Now, if you are in a situation where you do choose to share your story with others, remember this:

- Your journey is sacred. It's a deeply personal path, so ask yourself, *Who is privileged to hear my story? Whom do I trust?*
- You are in control of how much—or how little—you share. For example, one of my easy go-to lines has been, *"I know less now than I used to,"* which I would only say in one-on-one conversations. Some people responded well to this, others haven't.
- Once shared, your words cannot be taken back. This isn't to say you should be fearful, but rather thoughtful. Your perspective today is different from a year ago, and it will likely evolve further in the weeks, months, and years ahead. But for those you confide in, your story today may become the one that stays with them.
- Please be particularly cautious about sharing with Church leaders. This isn't meant to discourage you from sharing but recognize that not everyone will treat your journey and your questions with reverence. Some in callings of authority may respond in ways which could be harmful.

I understand the desire to connect with others who share similar experiences—I felt that way too. Have patience with those that may be very orthodox in their beliefs and try to not tread on their space.

I often found this a challenge. When I was going through my own faith transition, I was teaching Gospel Doctrine. I often wanted to edge towards sharing new insights and perspectives.

On a personal level, I was able to find careful ways to talk with my spouse without hurting her beliefs. I was surprised to find that she was feeling many of the same things as I was, often for different reasons. It has eventually led us to much more beautiful and expansive discussions of our faith and what is meaningful to us. We are more firmly rooted in our belief of a loving God and to each other.

I was very lucky in this. At times, having different beliefs than a significant other can be hard. I heard someone say recently that having a mixed-faith marriage used to mean two people from two different faiths. Now that can mean two people in the LDS religion.

Take care of yourself and, as you continue your journey, trust yourself. Be patient with those around you. And above all, know that you are not alone.

With warmth,

Your Friend

P.S. If you want to understand how to better navigate the LDS community, I'd recommend reading *Living on the Inside of the Edge: A Survival Guide* by Chris Kimball. Chris brings his experience as a life-long member and bishop to help you navigate being in the Church with changing beliefs.

## Letter Nine: Dualistic Thinking

Hi Friend,

Today I want to talk to you about a topic that really affected me deeply for a while: dualistic thinking.

Many faith traditions, including LDS teachings, encourage dualistic thinking—right vs. wrong, truth vs. deception. Sometimes we call it all-or-nothing or black-and-white thinking. And we have lived in it so much that we don't even think about it until the script is flipped.

In the Church, even from leaders, we hear it frequently. For example, in D&C 1:30 the Lord declares that it is the “only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth.”

That phrase is often shortened to, “the only true church,” all-or-nothing claims.

Let me give you some examples of ways our dualistic, right or wrong, all or nothing language is used when talking about the Church:

*“If it's false, we're engaged in a great fraud. If it's true, it's the most important thing in the world. Now, that's the whole picture. It is either right or wrong, true or false, fraudulent or true.”* Gordon Hinckley

*“He (Joseph Smith) was either a prophet of God, divinely called, properly appointed and commissioned, or he was one of the biggest frauds this world has ever seen. There is no middle ground.”* Joseph Fielding Smith

*“Our whole strength rests on the validity of that [first] vision. It either occurred or it did not occur. If it did not, then this work is a fraud. If it did, then it is the most important and wonderful work under the heavens.”* Gordon Hinckley

*“Either the Book of Mormon is true, or it is false; either it came from God, or it was spawned in the infernal realms. It declares plainly that all men must accept it as pure scripture or they will lose their souls. It is not and cannot be simply another treatise on religion; it either came from heaven or from hell. And it is time for all those who seek salvation to find out for themselves whether it is of the Lord or of Lucifer.”* Bruce McConkie

*“The Book of Mormon is the keystone of [our] testimony. Just as the arch crumbles if the keystone is removed, so does all the Church stand or fall with the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon.”* Ezra Benson



Referring to that last quote, Jeffrey Holland said *"It sounds like a "sudden death" proposition to me. Either the Book of Mormon is what the Prophet Joseph said it is or this Church and its founder are false, fraudulent, a deception from the first instance onward."*

These statements paint a clear picture: it's either all true, or none of it is.

And for a long time, I took them at their word, and it felt great, until it didn't. Then, it hurt.

When I began finding out more and more about truth claims, this kind of dualistic thinking caused me immense pain. It was a one-two punch for me.

If one thing I thought was true turned out to be different than I believed, did that mean nothing was true? It felt so do or die.

I started finding those statements above and I wrestled with them. Fortunately, some wise friends encouraged me to set those statements aside. And you might consider doing the same.

Why? Well, first, this type of dualistic thinking—that it's either one side or the other, with no middle ground, gets us in trouble every time. In religion, politics, history, parenting, or just about any other topic you can think of, the idea that things are one way, or another is just poor judgment.

If you don't believe it, just open your favorite social media app and take a scroll.

Second, the statements above are designed to put pressure on any one topic as the potential cause for everything to come crashing down. That was a personal source of pain for me. Did everything I examine have the possible consequence of destroying everything I believed? If something that I thought was true now turns out to not be true, is the chain event really that large?

Third, go back to our discussion about tension. There is value in sorting through the contraries to find another way.

There is a reason that this type of dualistic thinking is called a thought distortion. Because in life, history, and faith, things are rarely that simple.

Has anything touched by human hands ever been free of bias or mistakes?

Consider something as ordinary as witnessing a car accident. If four people see it from different angles, will they all describe it the same way? Of course not. Each perspective is valid but incomplete.

And if something isn't 100% true, does that really mean it's then 100% false?

Remember that quote from Joseph Smith that "By proving contraries, truth is made manifest"<sup>1</sup>

When we are willing to look at both sides, and reject all-or-nothing thinking, we can settle on something more real.

The more you recognize this kind of faulty dualistic thinking, the more you'll see it everywhere, and the more you'll find peace somewhere not in the extremes.

It's normal to swing between extremes at first, but in time, you may find yourself embracing the nuance, paradoxes, and complexity of the human experience.

So, how do you approach things? Here are a few ideas.

First, always look at the bigger picture. Going back to D&C 1:30, the full verse actually says:

*"The only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth, with which I, the Lord, am well pleased."*

There are about a thousand ways you could interpret that entire sentence, isn't there?

In fact, you have to ask yourself what "true and living" really means.

I am not 100% sure of what they mean together, but I know that Joseph Smith used it elsewhere.

For example, he called his wife Emma, "my only true and living friend." Does that mean he had no other true friends? No living friends? I don't think so. So maybe it means something different about the Church when the Lord called it "true and living."

Second, question extreme claims, no matter who they come from. Was the Book of Mormon really written *either* by God *or* by Satan? Is there no middle ground?

Third, embrace paradoxes.

Could the Book of Mormon be of uncertain origin and still be scripture? Sure.

Could Joseph Smith have done questionable things and still be a prophet? The Old Testament would say yes.

Could Church leaders be both inspired and uninspired and say good and harmful things? It's done every Sunday.

That's non-dualistic thinking: embracing that life can be two things at once.

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Smith, in *History of the Church*, 6:428.

Lastly, give compassion—to yourself and others. Many people hold tightly to dualistic thinking because it feels safe. But often, it only leads to pain when reality doesn't fit neatly into those categories.

Faith is not an all-or-nothing proposition. It is a journey—a process of seeking, learning, and growing. And it should be expected if your understanding evolves as you learn new things. Just because you learn something new doesn't mean you automatically have to throw out everything.

This type of dualistic thinking is known as a cognitive bias where one sees situations, beliefs, or people in extreme, absolute terms—something is either all good or all bad, completely true or entirely false, a total success or a complete failure.

Cognitive biases are systematic errors in thinking that affect the way we perceive and interpret information. Dualistic thinking is a bias because it distorts reality by oversimplifying complex issues into two extreme categories, ignoring the spectrum of possibilities in between.

It's something we learn, and this type of thinking leaves no room for nuance, complexity, or middle ground. And because we learned it, we can unlearn it too.

Don't let this type of thinking add more challenges and woundedness to you.

Be kind to yourself by not layering this dualistic thinking on top of everything you are learning. This can be heavy. You don't have to carry the burden of others' statements on your shoulders.

With warmth,

Your Friend

P.S. I want to give you my perspective on a timely but sensitive topic that relates to dualistic thinking, the idea of “anti-Mormon” information. If you are like me, you have spent a lifetime avoiding material because it's “anti-Mormon.”

There is a lot of material out there that is truly presented in a way that is against the church. There are many, including former members of the church, however well-intentioned, who criticize and finger-point at every aspect of the church. Their rancor and tone are such that it would leave you no doubt.

At the same time, I think the term anti-Mormon is too often used as a dog whistle, to get members to fear anything that opposes the official narrative of the Church. The term is used in such a way that scares members into not seeking questions.

At one time, books like *Rough Stone Rolling* by historian (and stake president and patriarch) Richard Bushman, or the Church's own Gospel Topics Essays would have been considered anti-Mormon.

Sentiments like this from Elder Boyd Packer are part of the problem, "I have a hard time with historians because they idolize the truth. The truth is not uplifting; it destroys...Historians should tell only that part of the truth that is inspiring and uplifting."<sup>2</sup>

When I read something like this, I recognize that Elder Packer and others do it to protect the Church, or the individual, and they think because they are protecting, they are right in doing so. But, as we see now, the approach is damaging in the long run.

My point is this, in your own studies and especially when someone pulls out the "uh oh, you've been reading anti-Mormon literature" recognize, and remind them that you are mature enough to recognize the difference between explaining the truth and trying to destroy.

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<sup>2</sup> D. Michael Quinn quoting Boyd K. Packer, *Pillars of My Faith*, Sunstone Symposium, Salt Lake City, August 19, 1994

## Letter Ten: People

Hi Friend,

You might remember that last time we talked about challenging dualistic thinking, that all-or-nothing or black-and-white thinking that leads us to think in extremes.

Today, I want to apply it to a particular topic: people.

What kinds of people? Historical people. But also, people today.

Let's start with historical:

As your views evolve, you may see historical figures, church leaders, or even family members differently. Someone you once admired may seem deeply flawed, while someone you dismissed may now appear insightful. This happens a lot in our society today. And it can happen equally with members of the Church, especially those in church history.

Recognize that people then are just as complex as people today are.

Try to hold space for complexity—people are not just "good" or "bad" but a mixture of both. Understanding this can bring both heartache and a newfound sense of compassion.

At first, this realization can feel unsettling. If someone made mistakes, does that mean everything they taught or stood for is invalid? If they did great things, does that mean their flaws don't matter? Both can be true at once. A person's failures don't erase their contributions, just as their achievements don't excuse their shortcomings.

This idea of being complex doesn't excuse what they've done...wrong is still wrong. And I am not trying to let anyone off the hook for bad, sometimes horrendous behavior.

But this is hard because in the LDS faith tradition we are extreme all or nothing thinkers, especially about people. We are very good at hagiography, a form of idolizing and creating idealized biographies of church leaders. That idolizing by telling heroic faith-inspiring stories and leaving out the negative stuff only sets us up to be disappointed, or worse, feeling like we've been deceived.

More and more we understand this. When I introduced a gospel doctrine class to the word hagiography and wrote it on the whiteboard, I turned around to see half the class either writing it down or looking it up on their phone (or texting their friends to say, "can you believe this guy?")

Yet, we still have a hard time believing that people are complex and nuanced, despite repeated attempts by prophets themselves who tell us that they are not perfect. So, you will hear people defend those in history until their last breath.

Let's listen to what voices from the past said about their own weaknesses:

Joseph Smith said, "A prophet was a prophet only when he was acting as such."

Brigham Young repeatedly stated something to the effect that, "I am not infallible and never claimed to be."

And today, Elder Dieter Uchtdorf commented in General Conference, "To be perfectly frank, there have been times when members or leaders in the Church have simply made mistakes. There may have been things said or done that were not in harmony with our values, principles, or doctrine."

I think this applies to today's leaders and teachers as well.

Elder Henry Eyring affirmed this idea: "The Lord has said that He is willing to work with us, imperfect as we are, because He loves us. That must be true for His servants as well."<sup>1</sup>

Elder Jeffrey Holland put it even more plainly: "Except in the case of His only perfect Begotten Son, imperfect people are all God has ever had to work with. That must be terribly frustrating to Him, but He deals with it. So should we." (General Conference, April 2013, *Lord, I Believe*)

There are four reasons that I see why we should not waste a moment trying to categorize people because of their mistakes. In fact, we should consider giving them some grace.

First, recall our discussion about all-or-nothing thinking.

If we expect perfection from our leaders, we set ourselves up for disappointment. Doing so, we rob ourselves of valuable insights from imperfect but inspired individuals. Understanding that truth can come through flawed messengers allows us to discern with both wisdom and humility.

Second, it's too easy to judge historical figures by today's standards, and it doesn't work out well.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Power of Teaching Doctrine*, Ensign, May 1999

This tendency is known as presentism.

This happens when we evaluate people from the past using modern values, overlooking the cultural norms, knowledge, and limitations of their time. While it's important to acknowledge mistakes and learn from history, we should also strive for fairness. Just as we hope future generations will understand the complexities of our time, we should extend that same consideration to those who came before us.

Recognizing presentism allows us to hold a more balanced view of history. Rather than seeing past leaders as either wholly good or irredeemably flawed, we can appreciate their contributions while acknowledging their imperfections and the harm they caused. This doesn't mean excusing wrongdoing but rather striving for a deeper, more compassionate understanding—one that reflects the reality that all people, past and present, are shaped by their circumstances.

Third, we can recognize someone has done something, but we can't fully understand their motivations.

When we look back, we can see past actions. But, unless we have someone's record, thoughts and motivations are not understandable. So, how could we judge?

Maybe more importantly, why should we be the ones to judge?

The fact of the matter is that there are many things that have happened in the Church where people were motivated to protect the Church.

Can I relate to that? Well, in my call to the journey, I can think of countless times when I saw or heard something I thought was wrong, maybe a policy or a bit of history, and I just assumed that it would all work itself out. As long as the church was true, I reasoned, it would be okay.

Fourth, a reminder that people are just complex.

Think of someone you admire. What qualities make them inspiring to you? Now, consider someone whose actions trouble you. What might have shaped their decisions? Doing this doesn't mean excusing harm or ignoring truth—it means embracing a more honest, complete picture of humanity.

The more we learn to see people in their full complexity, the more grace we can offer—to others and to ourselves. And perhaps, in doing so, we will find it easier to navigate our own faith journey with patience, humility, and hope.

With history behind us, let's turn to current people. I know...there are times when current members of the church are obstacles to our healing, perhaps even to your belief.

Do you remember how I said people are complex? Here's a switch: they (we) can be both complex, and simple.

We can be complex in that we can hold two or more conflicting positions. For example, having a desire to follow the Savior, and exhibit a serious lack of charity for others.

And we can be simple in that we often will follow a simple script that we've been taught our entire lives. Here's the simple pattern related to many in the church when they know you are going through a faith crisis:

First, they will want to fix you, and when they can't, they will want to avoid you and label you.

And rare is the person that will truly want to understand you.

Here are two scripts that people can adopt. The first is following a script about people who are going through a faith transition or leaving the church.

You've heard these before:

- *"They must have been offended."*
- *"They wanted to sin."*
- Or a not-so-subtle variation, *"They prefer the great and spacious building."*
- *"They were deceived by anti-Mormon material."*
- *"They lost the Spirit."*
- *"They never really had a testimony."*
- *"They leave, but they can't leave the church."*

The second is that familiar script of what they think you need which is to "come back." The holy trinity of prayer, scripture study, and keeping the commandments (or, often the variation of going to the temple).

Their script is, that if your testimony is in question, it's because you've stopped doing those things. So, if you want to get it back, just start doing them again.

And if you've been doing them, do them more...because that's what worked before.

I like to think of prayer, scriptures, commandments, as good things. But, in some ways, they are like the basics of water, soil, and sunlight to a garden.

It's difficult to grow anything without them. But at some point, if you want to create a flourishing, vibrant garden, you need more.



So, try not to worry about others. Just keep moving ahead.

With warmth,

Your friend

P.S. I'm going out on a bit of a limb today with my recommendation. It's a short one. Open your favorite podcast app and look up "Mel Robbins Let Them Theory." It will help you because the real problem isn't those people—historical and today. The problem is that you're letting them impede your healing and reconstruction.

You'll get it when you listen to the podcast, but by the end, hopefully you'll be saying, "Let them be whatever they are or were." And "Let me work on my own healing."

P.P.S I am going to point out something you may have already noticed. When referring to Church leaders, I don't use middle initials. It might have served a purpose when Joseph Fielding Smith and Joseph F. Smith were in the same quorum. I don't think it serves any positive purpose and may just carry some negative "hagiographic" side effects today.

## Letter Eleven: Beliefs, Shelves, and Reordering

Hi Friend,

In all the letters so far, I've avoided using one of the most common analogies for a sharp change in someone's faith and the start of your journey—the *broken shelf*.

You've probably heard of it, but just in case you haven't, here's the gist: Many people going through a faith transition talk about building a metaphorical shelf where they place the questions, concerns, and uncomfortable things they come across—beliefs, doctrines, things people have said or done, policies, and so on. Over time, as they add more and more to the shelf, it eventually breaks under the weight of it all.

It's a vivid image. The broken shelf represents a moment of crisis. Maybe it's why we then decide to depart for the journey! The house is a mess!

Whether or not that analogy resonates with you, stay with me for a second. I actually like it because it captures something real about how we tend to set things aside instead of dealing with them right away.

That strategy of setting things aside works only for so long. None of those problems have disappeared—we just set them aside. And when the shelf breaks, they all just land on the floor. Messier than ever together.

So now, you're still left with them. You still have to deal with it. I don't know about you, but I can see the mess. And I definitely feel the urge to run and grab a broom.

What the analogy also captures well is the *next step*: deciding how to clean it up.

Some people go the quick route. They grab a big broom—or a shop vac—and sweep it all straight into the trash. Done. That's the "I've had enough" approach.

More often though, it's a slower, more careful process. You've got that broom in hand, but then you notice the larger shards of glass scattered across the floor—bits and pieces of what you used to believe. And instead of sweeping them away, you start picking them up, one by one, holding them up to the light and asking: *Do I even believe this?*

That kind of scrutiny is good. It's what we call *deconstruction mode*.

And you're not alone in thinking that's a worthy pursuit. Hugh Brown—former member of the First Presidency—once said:

“The honest investigator must be prepared to follow wherever the search for truth may lead. Truth is often found in the most unexpected places. He must, with fearless and open mind, insist that facts are more important than any cherished mistaken beliefs, no matter how unpleasant the facts or how delightful the beliefs.”

Yes, even if that truth is scattered across the floor.

President Reuben Clark echoed something similar, with a bit more determination:

“If we have the truth, it cannot be harmed by investigation. If we have not the truth, it ought to be harmed.”

So, yeah—this process of examining, questioning, even breaking things apart—that's welcome. It's healthy. But also, it's hard.

That's why we put things on the shelf to begin with.

Now here you are, looking at all the things you once tried to avoid. Which raises the question: *Why?*

Why is it important for you to look at them now?

As your friend—and resident non-black-and-white thinker—I'll offer you two reasons why you *probably* feel like it matters... and one reason why maybe it *doesn't* matter quite as much. At least, not right now.

First: You've been taught it matters. You—and pretty much every Christian—have been taught that *beliefs* matter a lot. Not just any beliefs—*correct* beliefs matter.

As Christians, we've been arguing about which ones for two thousand years!

And in the LDS tradition, we've doubled down on this idea. We've taken pride in being exact—about doctrine, about principles, about behavior. We've built a culture that values having the right answers in great detail. Even the temple reinforces this idea that you can be given everything you need to know to get to heaven. Every step in the process is laid out.

And the second reason is: your tribe.

Specifically, your community—your church tribe. When belief is so closely tied to belonging, as it is, losing your beliefs can feel like losing everything: your family, your friends, your ward, your community.

And that kind of belonging runs deep. We've relied on tribes for hundreds of thousands of years—for safety, identity, and meaning. So, when the beliefs that tie us to that community break, it doesn't just feel like a theological crisis. It feels like a social and emotional earthquake.

So, what do we do?

I wondered that myself. If some of my beliefs had landed on the floor, should I throw *all* of them there? Should I keep sorting through them, one by one?

I thought so. I thought that writing down what I now believed was the answer. I even started writing my own articles of belief—I got as far as ten.

But then I read something that shook my whole approach: it's the third parable in Matthew 25—of the sheep and the goats.

You probably remember it, but it's worth a re-read: Matthew 25:31–46.

In it, Jesus describes the day of His return. All people are gathered together, and they're divided into two groups. The sheep are on the right, the goats on the left.

And how are they divided? That's what they wonder. Some are asking, "Why am I on the right? Others, "Why am I on the left?"

Not by beliefs. Not by doctrine. Not even by religious affiliation. Jesus separates them as a shepherd—because He knows them.

No, they're divided based on how they treated others—whether they fed the hungry, gave water to the thirsty, clothed the naked, visited those in prison, cared for the marginalized.

Not a single question about beliefs. No creeds. No qualifiers.

Just whether they lived a life of love.

That hit me hard. It left me with a radical question: *How much do beliefs really matter?*

I mean, it's not even on the test!

In *The Great Spiritual Migration*, Brian McLaren—a former pastor who writes to help people with their faith—writes:

“The Christian faith, in its original, most radical form, was not primarily a system of beliefs. It was a loving way of life.”

And he goes even further:

“People are leaving the church [any church] not because they don't believe what the church teaches, but because they *do* believe what Jesus taught.”<sup>1</sup>

He's not saying beliefs don't matter at all. Just that they don't matter as much as living a life centered on love. In fact, they are even choosing that life centered on love over their tribe of common beliefs.

Jesus' parable confirms that for me. The most important thing isn't holding the right ideas. It's feeding, clothing, visiting, and loving others. It's living what he calls a Christian ethic.

Sometimes, our beliefs get in the way of that.

Rachel Held Evans once wrote:

“My friend Adele describes fundamentalism as holding so tightly to your beliefs that your fingernails leave imprints on the palm of your hand... I think she's right. I was a fundamentalist not because of the beliefs I held but because of *how* I held them: with a death grip. It would take God himself to finally pry them out of my hands.”<sup>2</sup>

That stuck with me. If our hands are clenched so tightly around our beliefs, how can we use those same hands to serve others?

Which would Jesus prefer?

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<sup>1</sup> Brian McLaren, *The Great Spiritual Migration*

<sup>2</sup> Rachel Held Evans, *Faith Unraveled*

Correct beliefs?

Or a life lived in love?

Just something to think about.

With warmth,

Your Friend

P.S. When it comes to your beliefs, I think this quote from a book from Sarah Bessey is a great guide:

"An evolving faith doesn't mean we burn down everything that was once precious to us. There is something between everything and nothing. We aren't required to toss everything we were taught or given as worthless or useless or even toxic as we grow and change, becoming more fully ourselves. There is room to honor and hold space for the precious and the meaningful. Even as we evolve in our beliefs, our homes, and our lives, it's okay to bring things with you."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Sarah Bessey, *Field Notes for the Wilderness: Practices for an Evolving Faith*

## Letter Twelve: Redefine Scripture

Dear Friend,

I want to write today about something that was very important to me in my past and that I am working through in faith journey—scripture.

For so long, scripture felt like bedrock foundation. It was the thing I could always turn to for answers, clarity, and truth. I was quite adherent to reading from them daily. I've probably read the Book of Mormon at least eighty times cover to cover.

I read them with an amount of certainty and belief that every word meant exactly what it said, no more and no less. Perhaps you have as well.

And if you're like me, part of your faith journey might involve starting to see scripture differently. That shift can be painful—and truthfully, I am still working through it. I can also tell you that the journey to reconciling my relationship with scripture has been beautiful.

In some ways, the stories from our scriptural canon feel more complicated. The commands and demands from God are more questionable. The former certainties are less certain.

You may wonder:

*If I don't read these words the same way anymore, do they still count as scripture?*

*If they're not literal or historical, are they still true or good?*

Here's what I've come to believe.

I've benefited from the fact that I've never taken the scriptures as 100% literal. That's helped in seeing all of them as flawed but worthwhile.

Scripture has never just been about the words themselves—it's always been about what they point to. They're about the way they stir us, humble us, teach us, awaken us, and how they bring us into conversation with God.

As Latter-day Saints, we've always had a more expansive view of scripture than most. Ours is a tradition that says God didn't stop speaking with the Bible. We believe in continuing revelation. We believe in "many great and important things yet to be revealed." We believe that scripture can and should be expansive.

Perhaps you're now realizing that scripture doesn't have to be in a leather-bound volume. That it doesn't need chapter and verse to be sacred. And that it doesn't have to be historically or literally true to hold spiritual value.

That realization might feel disorienting at first. Then, it can be a relief. Then you can look differently at stories of prophets that command she-bears to slay children or gods that threaten wives with damnation if they don't accept polygamy.

Give yourself permission to let those things go.

But it gets even better than letting go. There is also expansion that opens up an even wider world of wisdom from new voices.

If you can believe that, for example, the Book of Mormon inspired you despite its flaws, you can believe that about many written volumes.

And that creates an opportunity for you to decide what is scripture to you. You can create your own canon, not relying on what others decided hundreds of years ago should or shouldn't be included.

So, what do you include? For me, scripture is anything that brings me closer to the Divine. Anything that teaches me to love better, see more clearly, walk more gently can be scripture.

That has opened me up to so many new voices, both Christian and not, who have distilled peace. Scripture can be what inspires you.

You don't have to treat all texts the same. Not everything deserves the same weight or reverence. You can be discerning. You can let some things go. And you can let new things in.

Someone recently shared this social media post with me from Zachary Helton:

"When I left institutional Christianity, I really missed the Bible.

Not the problematic parts—but the idea of having a sacred book I could claim.

I didn't want to just replace it with something else-but as I read about other spiritual traditions, I realized there might be a different way to think about it...

Thich Nhat Hanh writes that forming a canon is like "stringing precious jewels together to make a necklace.'

We decide what the string is-based on our highest values and our ultimate concerns... And in light of that, we decide which precious jewels belong on the string, and which don't.

What if that's the posture we need now?

Not a closed box decided long ago-but something more alive?

Not rigid, but reflective?

Not handed down, but intentionally chosen?



Built from what brings us alive and helps us connect?

That canon would look different for each of us.

The things we put in them may not “sound sacred”

but by stringing them together,

we make them sacred.

That's what the

Christian canon once was-

before it became institutionalized and untouchable.

If we want a spirituality that supports our truest selves—

maybe this is a posture we should reclaim.”

If you've stopped reading scripture for a while, I understand. It's hard to digest. But when you're ready, maybe try reading different scripture, and read it differently.

But when you are ready, create your own canon. Ask yourself, what is useful to you? String it together in your own volumes, and choose as widely as you wish.

Then, when you are reading scripture, don't ask, “Is this literal?” but “Is this loving?”

Not “Is this historical?” but “Is this helpful?”

Not “Is this the Word of God?” but “Is God speaking to me through this?”

You might find the sacred is still speaking—just in new ways. And you're still allowed to call it scripture.

With warmth,

Your Friend

## Letter Thirteen: Spirituality

Hi Friend,

At this point I'd like to ask you, "How is your spirituality?"

Is it something that matters to you? If it is, I hope you'll keep reading.

Some people worry that if they disengage from the Church—whether that means—stepping away, taking a break, or even just quietly unplugging while still showing up—they'll lose all sense of spirituality.

But I believe the opposite can be true. Here's why.

To me, spirituality is about drawing closer to the divine. It's about cultivating a more personal connection with God.

As a member of the Church, you've likely heard that the best way to do that is in certain places and through specific practices. And those ways can be powerful. But there are seasons in life when we may need something different—something more.

Do you remember my gardening analogy from a while back? I compared the traditional spiritual practices—scripture study, prayer, and keeping commandments—to soil, water, and sunlight. They're foundational. It's hard to grow anything without them.

But they're not *everything*. Even with the right seeds, soil eventually becomes depleted. It needs fertilizing. Gardens need weeding, staking, and attention. And if all you're ever growing is the same zucchini year after year... Well, it can start to feel a little bleak.

I'm not knocking zucchini—I like it too. But is that all you want is spiritual zucchini?

Spirituality, in my experience, is much like a garden. Do you want a single crop, or something rich, diverse, and flourishing?

That connection to the divine is deeply personal. And how you nurture it can take many different forms. Is the standard way of praying you were taught in Primary not working for you? Set it aside and try something that does. You can still feel God; it just might not be in the same way as before.

So, give yourself permission to explore. Ask yourself: *What else connects me to God?*

Here are a few ideas to consider:

- Practicing meditation and stillness
- Walking in nature
- Seeking out moments of awe
- Changing our practice of prayer

- Finding meaning through service
- Building deeper relationships—and kind, casual ones, too
- Being kind for no reason other than to ease someone else's day
- Doing something for a greater good
- Reading additional scriptures, or listening to music and literature that speaks to your soul
- Looking for the best in others—and being grateful when you see it

I've found value in many of these—more than I expected. They've opened new ways to feel God's presence: direct, subtle, calming.

One that's been especially meaningful to me is cultivating *a sense of awe*. You've likely felt it too—maybe while flying above the clouds, looking over the Grand Canyon, standing atop a tall building, or gazing at the night sky.

Astronauts describe something similar when they see Earth from space. It's called the *overview effect*: a perspective shift that brings a sense of wonder, connection, and the fragility of life.

I've created a small version for myself—what I call my “Daily Dose of Awe.” I often find it while walking my dog. I pause to notice the way the clouds gather, or a pair of ducks drifting in to land on the pond, or a bee making its way from bloom to bloom. These tiny moments pull me back to the divine.

Dacher Keltner, in his book *Awe*, writes:

“Awe is the feeling of being in the presence of something vast that transcends your current understanding of the world.”

To me, that sounds a lot like connecting with God.

So, if spirituality has been important to you and you're feeling a little disconnected lately—know that it's not out of reach. Maybe it's just waiting to grow in new ways.

And by the way, that experience of being spiritually unplugged while still physically present? It has a name: PIMO (Physically In, Mentally Out). When I first heard it, I had to look it up.

Whatever your beliefs, I believe there's always room to reconnect—to deepen your spirituality, to feel something bigger than you or me. So, try something new. Let your spiritual garden grow in its own beautiful way.

With warmth,

Your Friend

P.S. I thought about naming this chapter something witty like Feeding your Soul because I think a lot about my whole self now—mind, body, and spirit. That's important so recognize that deconstruction and reconstruction can wreak havoc on your body and mind as well as your spirit. It's one of the reasons I made a much more determined effort at daily mindfulness. I also spent more time on improving my physical health and learned to focus on the basics: good nutrition, exercise, plenty of sleep, and reducing stress. It's critical.

P.P.S. I like the book *Awe*, from Dacher Keltner, which talks about connecting to the eight wonders of life: moral beauty, collective effervescence, nature, music, visual design, spirituality and religion, life and death, and epiphany. *As your friend, I would recommend you listen to the podcast with Faith Matters #184 Your Brain on Awe—A Conversation with Dacher Keltner.* It'll tell you everything you need to know on the topic. Enjoy your daily dose of awe!

## **Letter Fourteen: You are in the driver's seat**

Hi Friend,

I hope you are keeping well. You probably know that some patches are easier than others. When they get hard, remember that you have what it takes to get through this. Even when you feel tossed about, know that there are better days ahead.

Indulge me with this little story: On your journey, you start meeting people along the way. After some time, you connect enough that they offer to take you on a ride with them. They may even suggest that the journey is much easier if you join them. It seems tempting—they're driving a comfortable bus with lots of passengers. Surely there must be something good happening there for so many people to join.

Not only that, but they also seem to have some good answers you're looking for, and your journey has felt pretty lonely so far.

To make matters more confusing, others that you've known have continued to reach out, reminding you of all you've had prior to your journey. They recommend that you get back on the bus that takes you back home. That's where you belong. You know the driver and are familiar with the roads you've traveled.

As you're considering this, not quite sure what to do, I pull up in a car. You tell me about these inviting offers from others, and how tired you've become.

In response, suggest that it's time for you to drive yourself. I pull out keys from my pocket and hold them up for you. If you're tired, you can take my car for part of the journey. And more importantly, you're in the driver's seat.

That's right—you get to decide where you're going, how fast or slow you want to travel, where to stop along the way, and who you bring along for the ride. You take the keys; they are yours.

This might surprise you. Where would you go?

Perhaps you're not feeling confident in your driving abilities anymore. You may even question your driving skills. You'd like more guidance before venturing out on unfamiliar roads. You want a teacher.

As you take the keys in your hand, I have one recommendation: choose your teachers wisely.

This advice comes from the heart. Like you, for many years, I thought I was driving my own path, but on closer examination, I realized the map I was following had already been drawn in detail—one street, one direction at a time.

So, when I sat down behind the wheel for myself, I wish someone had told me how important it was to be in the driver's seat and seek out thoughtful guides.

For years, you've likely focused on a particular set of driving instructions or let someone else drive entirely. Those places you've gone and experiences matter—they're part of your story—but now you have an opportunity to widen your perspective.

So, choose your teachers wisely, and widely.

How wide is for you to decide. But here's something I've learned: God loves all people. Because of this, I believe Divine wisdom has touched every land, culture, people, and tradition. There is wisdom to be found in unexpected places, in voices you might not have been taught to trust. Truth isn't confined to any single corner—it shines through many spaces and people.

You can choose to listen to various teachers, both within and outside the LDS tradition, and find what resonates most deeply with you.

As you choose, think about looking for those who:

- Love truth but can live with certainty
- Live with humility—not claiming they have all the answers
- Speak with compassion, not contempt or anger
- Encourage growth, not fear
- Don't spend time criticizing your other teachers
- Invite you into deeper love for God, yourself, and others

Don't be afraid to learn from diverse thoughts and perspectives—even if this feels uncomfortable at first. Sometimes that's where the most profound growth happens.

In my own journey, I've found much truth in many areas. One of the most rewarding has been the Buddhist tradition. I'm not Buddhist, and I'm not suggesting you become one either. Instead, I appreciate the Dalai Lama's approach, who said, "Do not try to use what you learn from Buddhism to be a Buddhist. Use it to be a better whatever you already are." You can use that approach with anything that you learn whether spiritual or secular: "use it to be a better whatever you already are."

This is your road now. Choose your teachers thoughtfully, and then drive forward with a full heart, courage, and curiosity.

Look in that rear view mirror for a moment. I'm standing there cheering for you, and I can't wait to see where you go.

With warmth,

Your Friend

P.S. If you're still wondering how to approach the idea, here's a metaphor that's been helpful to me: the drawing compass. This builds on a concept I've heard from several people including Michael Wilcox, an LDS institute of Religion teacher who has been featured on the Faith Matters podcast (BTW, I can't recommend the podcast enough). Listen to episodes #85 and 86.

Remember that two-point drawing compass from your school days? Its two points serve different functions: a fixed foot that anchors in one spot, and a searching foot that draws a circle as wide or narrow as you choose.

At one time, my circle of spiritual beliefs was anchored firmly in the center of my LDS beliefs, and my searching foot drew a circle that almost perfectly overlapped those same beliefs.

Now, my fixed foot remains anchored in core beliefs about God and love, but I recognize those beliefs aren't as comprehensive as I once thought. There's much more to explore. My searching foot now draws a much wider circle, encompassing so much more.

This approach has been exciting. I've discovered many insights that enhance and build upon my existing beliefs. It's thrilling to find something that resonates deeply and incorporate it with what I already hold true.

This has brought me a new sense of peace and sincerity, helping me engage more meaningfully with some LDS beliefs while also expanding beyond them.

## Letter Fifteen: Rituals

Hi Friend,

Let's talk today about rituals...

That sounds kind of weird, doesn't it?

It's not a word we use much, but we practice them a lot.

Oh, you know, we tend to use the word ordinance more frequently. You probably think of them as things we participate in, that are largely administered by the church: baptism, sacrament, the temple ordinances.

And maybe that's the problem—we don't think about them often. We mainly show up.

I know I didn't think about them much, except how to get the most out of them when I was participating.

I tried to make them meaningful. Preparing for sacrament and keeping my thoughts focused on the hymn or reading scriptures for sacrament and such. But I think you'd agree that we can sort of switch on the ritual autopilot. We show up and participate.

For me, things changed a bit when Covid-19 hit, and we were all at home. When sacrament became a weekly family ordinance that we did ourselves, it became more of a ritual. We were administering it, so we put more thought into how to make it meaningful while we were at home.

To improve the experience, my wife, being her thoughtful self, ordered a set of plates and small sacrament cups that were hand made by a refugee family. It gave us an added personal touch, and added a broader part of our ritual, which included washing the plates and cups each week.

It also opened up a personal aspect of rituals that made it more thoughtful.

I came to see the ritual of the sacrament, including preparation and cleaning up, as a solemn activity. It was something that had meaning and took me out of the everyday, even while at home: preparing the service, blessing it, my sons administering it, and washing up afterwards.

It happened because we did it and it added meaning to my life. And that was pretty amazing during a difficult time.

I know that not everyone had the availability of the sacrament during that time. And I recognize that women, who don't administrate ordinances, may have different feelings.



But bear with me, because I believe the sentiment of rituals can appeal to us all. Author Casper ter Kuile says that the very definition of a ritual is “taking things we do every day and layering meaning...onto them, even experiences as ordinary as reading or eating--by thinking of them as spiritual practices.”

It’s summed up so well by Christina Baldwin who said that “A ritual is the act of sanctifying action—even ordinary action so it has meaning.”

Sanctifying an action: making meaning from the ordinary. To me, that’s a “Yes I want more of that” kind of amazing.

Yet, despite the power of my experience, I mostly filed it away post Covid. That is, until I started on my own faith journey, where I once again learned that there is power to creating rituals that are meaningful in our lives.

For me, this recognition started with small rituals. Hiking the woods nearby with my dog. Reading from the same sacred texts every morning and then taking time for mindfulness and expressing gratitude. Taking my AirPods out and listening to the birds when I walk. Finding opportunities to volunteer and to do service.

They are all rituals. They are easy, free, and powerful. And I no longer think they need to be owned by someone else, or only done periodically. They can be part of our daily experience.

So, if you are looking for something to enrich your life regularly, create your own rituals that make life more meaningful.

I invite you to think about the areas you can enrich with rituals:

**Personal rituals.** Find what is meaningful for you and create personal small rituals of study, contemplation, worship, connection, or temporary solitude and disconnection from the world.

**Family rituals.** Our family has had many rituals in the past. Some we’ve been able to keep. Others haven’t fared so well. We are still trying to find those that are meaningful. Sometimes it’s a struggle. They include getting together, celebrating life milestones, and with our children at various stages of belief, creating meaningful holiday rituals.

**Community rituals.** Getting together with others or participating in our community. Our favorite is sharing a meal with others in our home, which has always been to us. It has always brought us joy.

Again, from author Casper ter Kuile,

“How might I find deeper happiness? The science points to an answer in the abstract: Find more community. Deepen your connections with others. Be with others in meaningful ways. Find rituals to organize your life. It will boost your happiness, give you greater joy, and even add ten years to your life expectancy, science suggests.”

Good luck with finding rituals that move and sanctify you and regularly bring you closer to the divine and to those around you.

I hope you can find what’s meaningful for you, and you do it again and again.

With warmth,

Your Friend

P.S. How do we address the topic of our most common ritual, prayer. I don’t know if it’s meaningful to you or not. I can tell you that the pendulum has swung during my journey from deep, long, and heart wrenching one-way conversations, to no prayer at all. Maybe never does one feel the deep night of the soul more than in unanswered pleas.

I can vividly remember prayer teaching moments in my life—when I was an investigator being taught by the Elders, teaching as a missionary and helping my children pray. We’ve always been instructed that there is a formula to how it’s done. And, at least for me, that taught me that in some ways, my relationship with God was transactional. Ask, receive, thank, and ask again.

I think that prayer can evolve and still be meaningful, even if traditional our understanding of God or how God communicates with us may change. I hope you find what is meaningful for you—something that helps you feel mindful of the presence of God, a sense of gratitude, and a connection to something that is larger than yourself. That doesn’t have to completely disregard nor completely honor the traditional practice of prayer that you’ve always held to.

P.P.S. Here are a few reading recommendations for you:

The Power of Ritual: Turning Everyday Activities into Soulful Practices by Casper ter Kuile. In this book the author, a Harvard Divinity School graduate, explains how to take everyday actions and turn them into rituals to improve our well-being and sense of community.

The Art of Gathering: How We Meet and Why it Matters by Priya Parker. If you long for better gatherings with others, this is a great and practical book to guide you.

## Letter Sixteen: Simplify

Hi Friend,

Back in letter three, we talked about faith stages, and how shifting from stage to stage was a well-documented process

You may remember that Brian McClaren outlined four stages: simplicity, complexity, perplexity, and harmony.

I learned about the stages of faith when I had two feet planted in perplexity, a stage that is marked by questioning and doubt. Having felt like I lost most of what I was sure I knew, I felt confused and unsure by all the complexities that I was now experiencing. If you're there, you know why it's called perplexity!

From then on, it was a lot of questioning, learning, more questioning, learning, and so on.

Eventually, we hopefully get to a new understanding of faith and reconcile a few things while being open to not reconciling others. Eventually, I think we can become more inclusive, compassionate, and maybe a little more willing to live with uncertainty.

But here's the thing, faith transitions are complex—so many ideas, so much history, so many opinions. During this time, I've found that one thing has worked for me: to simplify and focus on what truly matters.

You don't have to figure everything out at once.

Let yourself breathe and take things one step at a time.

I wanted to share an exercise that I've recently found helpful when I felt lost in the perplexity of the questioning, reading, listening to podcasts, attending church, etc.

At one point, I was lost in perplexity and it all felt so complicated, like sitting at the table in front of a jigsaw puzzle, trying to put pieces together. There was so much questioning, reading, listening to podcasts about the Church, spirituality, and self-help.

So, I decided to simplify by writing out where I was and what I should focus on with just three questions:

1. **What's working for me right now?** What practices, beliefs, or ideas are helping me feel grounded and at peace? I can just hold onto these

2. **What am I working on?** These are the things I'm actively wrestling with—big or small. I try to keep this list short.
3. **What do I want to work on in the future?** This is my “parking lot”—ideas or questions I've set aside for later, when I have more capacity. This can be as long as needed.

It's not a magical framework, but it helped me get the clutter out of my head and onto paper. It gave me some breathing room.

Here's a glimpse of what I wrote the first time I tried this:

What's working:

- My understanding of and peace with Church history and restoration claims
- Living with uncertainty

What I am working on:

- What are my scriptures—that is, what brings peace and puts me in a contemplative state of mind?
- What are my core beliefs?

What do I want to work on in the future?

- A better understanding of the nature of God
- Building a wider sense of community and service

Sometimes I am a bit methodical, so this helped me.

The one that surprised me most: *living with uncertainty*. I felt and still feel more at peace in with belief in uncertainty than I ever did in a rigidly defined certainty. And I've come to believe that an overemphasis on certainty can do more harm than good.

I love what the poet Rainer Maria Rilke once wrote,

*“Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves... Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.”*

So, wherever you are on your journey, whether in simplicity, complexity, perplexity, or harmony, I hope this simple exercise can give you a little space. A little grace. And a reminder that it's okay to move slowly.

With warmth,  
Your Friend

## Letter Seventeen: Inherent Worth and Love

Hi Friend,

This is a tender topic, but one that matters deeply: inherent worth.

I bring it up because it's something I had to learn on my own in the middle of deconstructing and reconstructing my faith.

Inherent worth is the intrinsic value every person possesses simply by being human. You have worth—*not* because of your accomplishments, personality, church calling, number of friends, social media following, or anything else that we or society might use to measure value. You are worthy simply because you exist.

It's a truth that sounds simple, but it's often buried beneath layers of messaging that suggest otherwise—especially in faith communities, where "worthiness" is frequently emphasized.

Worth and worthiness are not the same. The former just is. The second is a judgement. But we too often tie them together.

Tamara Runia addressed this distinction beautifully in a recent General Conference:

"Your worth isn't tied to obedience. Your worth is constant; it never changes. It was given to you by God, and there's nothing you or anyone else can do to change it. Obedience brings blessings; that is true. But worth isn't one of them. Your worth is always 'great in the sight of God.'"

I love how plainly she says it: We have worth simply because we are.

Not enough of us hear that. And not enough of our religious language reinforces it.

Too often, we hear:

- That we are fallen, unworthy, even less than the dust of the earth.
- That we are only truly valuable in what we will become someday—"gods in embryo."
- Our blessings today are conditional and our value as gods in embryo are based on obedience.

Messages like these erode a person's self-worth. And when repeated, they plant in us a message that we're never quite enough.

Years ago, while teaching Gospel Doctrine during my faith transition, I found a scripture that landed in my heart and never left. It's from 1 John 4:

*Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God...*

*Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us...*

*There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear...*

*We love him, because he first loved us.*

That last line stunned me the first time I really saw it: “We love him, because he first loved us.”

God's love *precedes* everything. It's not earned. It's not transactional. It's foundational.

The Christian mystic Julian of Norwich wrote in the 14th century, “God loved us before he made us; and his love has never diminished and never shall.”

That feels whole and comforting to me. And it makes me believe that God is whole, too—not a God of shame or conditions, but of *pure, unconditional love*.

LDS author Fiona Givens put it so well, “God’s love for you is absolute and doesn’t change, never changes. He will greet you with the absolute love that you were sent with when you came on your mission to earth.”

Can you imagine that kind of love? The kind that greets you like a parent watching their child leave for a long journey—tearful, hopeful, and full of pride just because you're you?

That kind of love is the opposite of shame. It is the antidote to perfectionism. And it is the grounding truth behind every resilient person I've known—just a confidence that you are unconditionally loved by the divine.

Believing in your inherent worth changes how you navigate hard times. It quiets the voice of shame. It steadies the anxiety that comes from trying to “be enough.” And it helps you extend grace to yourself and others, because love is no longer conditional.

Ignore it when you are told that God loves you *more* when you do X or Y.

God already loves you. Period.

And we are already *worthy* of that love.

In *Moroni 7:46*, we read about faith, hope, and charity. The chapter ends with an invitation to “cleave unto charity, which is the greatest of all.” That kind of charity—*the pure love of Christ*—is not a reward for performance. It is a gift given freely, and it remains no matter what we face.

It says in that scripture that in the last day when we see God, we shall see Him as He is. I trust that we are going to see a loving God, filled with charity for us.



So, feel your worth, my friend. God's love is boundless. It is unconditional. And it was yours all along.

With warmth,

*Your Friend*

## Letter Eighteen: Handle the Past with Care

Hi Friend,

This letter may be particularly heavy. But it's long overdue.

One thing I've learned on my path is that those of us going through faith deconstruction often look back at our past lives with very mixed feelings.

This is natural. Studies suggest we humans spend nearly 50% of our time thinking about the past or the future. And I'm certain this percentage increases for those who have experienced significant changes or transformations.

Now that I've been going through it for some time, I think the emergence of these feelings is positive—a sign that you are working through deconstruction.

There are many emotions we can feel towards our past, but I wanted to touch on four that are particularly important: grief, loss, regret, and guilt.

Remember, I am not a mental health professional. I have no formal training. But I want to highlight these four for you to consider how they can be a guide to your future. So, let's start with a definition of each in the context of your spiritual past:

- Grief: a deep sorrow felt as one mourns the end of a once-cherished faith or spiritual identity.
- Loss: The experience of no longer having key elements of faith—such as community, certainty, or purpose.
- Regret: The wish that one had believed, acted, or questioned differently in the past.
- Guilt: The internalized sense of having done wrong, harming others. This can also be accompanied by the feeling of shame—that you are somehow bad or lesser because of your actions.

Volumes have been written about each of these emotions so I couldn't possibly do them justice here in this letter.

But here's my message to you: I believe each of these can be a positive step forward towards your reconstruction and healing.

Let's take the first two, grief and loss, together.

Many people also experience grief over having lost what they once had—how they identified themselves, the beliefs they held. Your wounds from this process may still feel quite open and tender.

Accompanying that can be a real sense of loss. Loss of identity, community, friends, status, direction and purpose. This combination of grief and loss can bring a sense of forlornness—being lost, feeling alone.

And these feelings can be positive in that they give you a powerful sense of the direction you should go.

Are you familiar with the "red pill, blue pill" metaphor? In a popular science-fiction movie taking the red pill exposes us to the harsh reality of the world. In this instance, it can be metaphorically seeing the church history, policies, and practices in a different way, not the shiny varnished version. It was the start of our journey.

The blue pill represents returning to your former state of knowing before you took the red pill. It represents the blissful state you were once in.

Knowing what you know now, would you ever want to take the blue pill? Would you want to go back to blissfully not understanding?

I've wondered this myself at times. And I have never concluded that I'd want to go back.

But you are here now, feeling that grief and loss. It's painful. But you don't want to go back

So, ask yourself, what is that grief telling you? Where is the sense of loss leading you?

Do you miss loving Jesus wholeheartedly? There are millions of people doing that in all sorts of religious traditions.

Do you miss community? You can find that.

Do you miss having a spiritual identity? You can modify the one you have.

Have you lost a best friend or family over your beliefs? I am sorry if that is the case. There are others that are out there waiting to find and embrace you.

About the only thing you may not find again, truthfully, is that certainty you once felt. That "I know beyond a shadow of a doubt."

But that wasn't ever real to begin with.

Do you grieve over once having all the answers? Don't you think that knowing you can discover new truths every single day is just a little more exciting than "knowing" it all?

Grief and loss have purpose. Use them well to guide you to identifying and filling the wounds you feel. Write them down and find where they lead you.

Let's turn now to the third emotion: regret.

If you're on a faith journey, you likely question whether everything you've done in the past still has merit. That might be an understatement.

Now that you're where you are, you may look back and wish it were something different. Some people question why they served a mission, married who they did, or gave so much of their time to something they aren't so certain about.

This is understandable, especially considering how much of our past path was constructed for us.

My advice: hold to things dearer than that. Not all of it, maybe not even individual events, milestones, and actions. And do it for this simple reason: it's made you who you are today.

Handle your past with care.

Be willing to cherish mission experiences, scriptures you learned in seminary, times you felt the Spirit, the love that led you to make temple covenants, and the dedication you showed as an expression of devotion to God. Yes, even spiritual experiences—you can hold on to them.

You may even bring these things along on your journey if you find them helpful.

But don't bring along regrets, would have, should have, or shame.

Indulge me in a very personal experience to give you a sense of what I am trying to say.

Deep into my faith reconstruction, I had the opportunity to visit the temple and perform work for a friend. At that point, I had deconstructed so much that I viewed the temple and priesthood differently. I went for the love of this friend and what it meant to her, unsure if I might ever even return to the temple in the future.

On my way there, I stopped on the road with a full view of the temple ahead through my front windshield. This was the very temple where I did baptisms as a youth and received my own endowment. It was a personal "favorite."

As I sat there, I reflected on all the times I had visited this temple and many others around the world (I often made it a practice to visit temples in locations where I traveled).

I appreciated being able to serve as a proxy for my friend's husband. I knew it was meaningful for her, and I hoped it was significant for her husband who had passed on many years before. I felt grateful for the concept of doing that work on behalf of others and the concept that God loves all His children.

I turned to thinking about the countless hours I'd spent in the temple, I realized I don't regret a single one. I don't regret serving a mission, the thousands of hours spent in callings, or anything else.

It's made me who I am at this very moment. It's made me into the clay that can be molded to something new.

For that reason, handle the past with care.

Moreover, regarding the fourth emotion, guilt, I've learned to set aside the regrettable parts that could fill me with guilt—acting for the wrong reasons, judging others, doing things from misguided motivations, or focusing on obedience rather than love for others.

I say good riddance to those aspects of me. That was someone else; not who I am now. I don't look back on those parts with shame.

That former self plus new understanding has shaped who I am today.

It has led me to apologize, to re-evaluation, to change parts of me. It's turned weaknesses into potential strengths.

Let guilt be your guide to what you should be, what you aspire to be, not what you lament from the past.

So, handle it all with care. And carefully craft what you need from the emotions you feel.

Would I do it all again with my current knowledge? It's safe to say no. But these experiences make up who I am now, and what I have felt guides me towards the future.

And for that, I am grateful.

So, hold on to what's good for you, and appreciate where it's led you. Grieve, but don't look back at your past with regret.

With warmth,

Your Friend

P.S. As I write this, I know that almost everyone has something that they have been harmed by in some way in the church. It ranges from the minor to the traumatic.

Religious trauma is a form of psychological and emotional distress experienced by individuals due to harmful religious experiences or beliefs. It stems from negative religious environments, teachings, or practices that lead to significant well-being and self-esteem issues. This can manifest in various ways, including anxiety, depression, scrupulosity, and more. Religious trauma is real.

If you have suffered abuse or been harmed in any way, first, I am sorry. Please don't think I'm advocating that you simply discard the pain or suffering you've experienced. I sincerely hope you can find the right way to achieve peace, and I encourage you to seek professional counseling if appropriate and helpful.

## Letter Nineteen: Finding Community

Hi Friend,

It can feel isolating to go through a faith transition—especially when most or all of your community is still in the Church. But even in that loneliness, you are far from alone.

I know it's not easy. Rob Bell once put it so well:

“Some communities don't permit open, honest inquiry about the things that matter most. Lots of people have voiced a concern, expressed a doubt, or raised a question, only to be told by their family, church, friends, or tribe: ‘We don't discuss those things here.’

“But there are communities to discuss those things. Find them.”

Many people have walked this path and found meaningful relationships, new communities, and even deeper connections with family and friends—connections rooted in mutual acceptance rather than shared beliefs.

One of the biggest fears many face is: “*Without the church, who am I?*”

But your values, your kindness, your integrity—these are not things given to you by an institution. They are part of *you*. You still get to define what matters most, and you still get to define your community.

Part of that new community can come from finding others who are also in need of support. As BYU professor Daniel Becerra said:

“Throughout His ministry, Jesus had a special relationship with those who were marginalized in society: the poor, the afflicted, the stranger, and others who were often ignored or looked down upon—‘the least of these,’ as He refers to them in the Gospel of Matthew. But He didn't just minister to these individuals—He saw Himself in them.”

And now, perhaps having experienced marginalization yourself, you can begin to see *yourself* in others who are struggling. That's a sacred perspective. If it is in your heart, seek those people out.

Your efforts don't have to be grand. Peace and togetherness can come through small acts—simply being there for someone else.

Here's a thought on finding them on your journey: When I was teaching the Old Testament, I found comfort in a beautiful image from the Mishnah, one of the earliest texts of the Talmud. In *Midot 2:2*, it describes how pilgrims would ascend to the Temple in Jerusalem:

“All who entered the Temple Mount entered by the right and went round to the right and exited on the left—*except for those to whom something had happened*, who entered and went round to the left.”

Those in grief, distress, or pain would walk the opposite way—a quiet, visible signal to the community. And when someone walking right encountered someone going left, they were required to stop and ask: “*What happened to you?*”

They would listen, and then they would offer a blessing:

“May He who dwells in this house comfort you.”

“May He who dwells in this house draw you near again.”

“May He who dwells in this house bring you peace.”

Even in a sacred procession, the community paused to recognize those who were suffering. They created a community right at that moment, with each interaction.

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor who was executed during WWII, said:

“The first service one owes to others in a community involves listening to them. Just as our love for God begins with listening to God’s Word, the beginning of love for others is learning to listen to them. God’s love for us is shown by the fact that God not only gives God’s Word but also lends us God’s ear...We do God’s work for our brothers and sisters when we learn to listen to them.”

That kind of listening has helped me immensely. Sometimes it was the friend at church who quietly said, “*I know less today than I did ten years ago.*” Sometimes it was a text from someone I hadn’t heard from in years. Other times it came from podcasters, writers, and thinkers I’ve never met but who put words to things I was feeling.

And I’ve been incredibly fortunate to have a spouse who is walking her own path of faith expansion, willing to support me—or just sit with me when I need it.

I’ve found an online community where I can be honest. I joined a Zoom book club with like-minded people, and their trust and friendship have been a gift.

I’ve still learning to identify and ask people, “*Why are you going around to the left?*”—to see those who are suffering and listen to their stories. I’ve tried different ways to build community and reach out. Some worked, some didn’t. But I keep trying.

I can only express to you that there is a community out there for you. I hope you find it, and that you don’t feel alone.

With warmth,



### *Your Friend*

P.S. Can I suggest that you can find a newfound appreciation for giving service without expecting anything in return. Service provides lasting benefits. Not only can you help others in a Christ-like way, it offers a multitude of benefits to you, impacting both mental and physical well-being, and fostering a sense of purpose and connection.

You've learned an ethic of service in the LDS tradition, but I've observed it's often tied to ulterior motives or conditions. We frequently serve ourselves as LDS members more than others outside our community. When we do help others, we view it as a missionary opportunity, ready to cap it off with a handshake and invitation to church.

But service can be mutualistic and create a benefit of connection and longstanding relationships without strings attached. It's pretty liberating.

Just giving and serving without expecting anything in return is a blessing in itself. It doesn't have to be large. Given that you're used to serving others, when you do it without expecting anything like a missionary introduction, it can become your superpower.

The benefits of even small acts of service include increased happiness, life satisfaction, reduced stress and anxiety, improved self-esteem, and it's a bridge to neighbors and your community. So go forward and give it a try!

P.P.S If you're interested, here are a few books for thinking about building community:

Find Your People: Building Deep Community in a Lonely World by Jenny Allen

The Art of Community: 7 Principles for Belonging by Charles H. Vogl

## Letter Twenty: Flourishing, God, and Questions

Hi Friend,

This is my last letter.

I can already think of about ten other letters with things I could write about. But you and I know that this is not how it works. I am nothing more than a fellow traveler, hopefully one of many that you'll meet along the way that you will learn from and teach.

But I've thought for a while about what I'd want to say to you—to wrap this up, to offer something lasting, with the hope that we'll reconnect again in the future.

I hope you have sensed that I haven't written these letters to tell you how to think, or what to choose, how to navigate your evolving faith, or even whether to believe and have faith at all. Instead, I've tried to focus on something simpler and maybe more important: how to take care of yourself while navigating your journey.

Throughout it all, I've made the assumption that you would prefer to hold onto some belief in God, and that you'd like to stay in contact with them.

So, I want to use this final letter to talk two things I currently hold top of mind, and one thing I hold dear.

I'm at the point in my journey where I mostly think about two important topics, the first of which is flourishing.

What does flourishing mean? I think it's a good exercise to define it for yourself.

To me, flourishing means that despite all I've been through, despite how much my perspective has changed, that I can find a way to move forward that is positive and leads to transformation. For me, right now, that includes:

Reclaiming and owning authority, taking responsibility for oneself, one's values, growth, and the actions that will most help one achieves one's objectives.

Resilience, the ability to recover from setbacks.

Accepting grace and knowing that one's healing is beyond what we ourselves can do.

Feeling loved by the divine, without condition or merit and feeling self-worth.

Being able to listen and pull from many traditions and ideas and take from it what is helpful for oneself.

Living with and being comfortable with complexity and uncertainty.

Involved in authentic relationships and a supportive community.

Feeling a sense of meaning, awe and wonder with the world.

Finding a spirituality that allows one to connect with God and an ability to be nourished.

All of these lead me to the second thing I hold top of mind, and that is meaning making: how to assign importance and meaning to the past and interpret things in a way to go forward confidently and with purpose.

That feels like a day-by-day process, and that brings me to one thing that I hold dear: bringing questions to God.

One thing I have appreciated about our LDS tradition is that it encourages us to take our questions to God. It was *founded* on the very idea that when we have questions, we should go to God for answers.

Like one fellow traveler said to me, “I prefer to get my answers from primary sources.”  
Yes!

Throughout my own journey, my belief in God has never faltered. Oh, I’ve tested it. But even when everything else was in question, I still believed because I *chose* to believe. And I still do. It might be easiest to think I am wired for it. But in many ways, it just may be my preference.

And in my searching for God, I have found this: an even more loving, kind, and generous God than I previously believed in.

I believe God is eternally invested in us, endlessly patient, and deeply good. I believe They want what’s best for us. I believe They *want* us to wrestle, to wonder, and to grow. And to do that, I believe They want us to ask questions.

Remember when we talked about Jacob wrestling the angel? When Jacob held him, he asked for a blessing. The angel blessed him and named him Israel. That name, Israel, means “one who struggles with God.”

God lets us struggle so we can grow. And if God lets us struggle, I believe They also walk with us—not just when we’re faithful and sure, but also when we’re uncertain and undone. Maybe more so.

So, if you’ve felt alone in your questions, know this: you’re not. I believe in a God that doesn’t withdraw when we are wondering or wandering on our journey. God meets us there. Right there, in the middle of the journey, the twists, the turns, the wrong ways, because God is excited for us to grow.

Remember, “Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love Him.” (1 Corinthians 2:9).

I don’t know what kinds of questions God answers or wants to answer. I’ve tended to shy away from asking about missing car keys or what color to paint my house. I don’t know if They answer those questions or not.

But I do wonder if God is waiting for us to ask big questions. I’m curious if They want us to think bigger, waiting to reveal to us more.

Maybe this faith journey is God’s way of getting us to ask the big questions, to not be content with asking the small stuff.

Sarah Bessey said it right about faith journeys,

“It’s quite possible that this is all part of God’s plan.

Sometimes one of the greatest gifts God gives us is losing our religion. We have to be committed to unlearning the unhelpful, broken, false, or incomplete things if we want to have more space to relearn the goodness, joy, and embrace of God.”<sup>1</sup>

May, this is God’s way of telling us, “Sure, I’ll tell you where the car keys are. But next time, bring your big questions.”

I don’t know if I believe in a single straight and narrow path anymore. Let me rephrase that—I am not sure that strait and narrow means a path rigidly defined by taking specific steps, checking off a list, following a long list of commandments, and doing it one way.

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Bessey, Field Notes for the Wilderness

I think God wants us to listen to Them and for Them. I also think that They are every bit as vigilant as the father of the prodigal son in looking for us to return home, no matter the road, path, or field we take. I think we can find our way back to Them, finding that They are there, searching the horizon, waiting to embrace us again.

And I've found that's what really matters no matter where you are on the journey. It's what's in your heart—and who you're becoming.

And if you're becoming more loving, more patient, more kind—then I believe you're doing the journey right.

When I first started my journey, I encountered people who had already been on theirs for ten or twelve years. That worried me. If they hadn't figured it out yet, how long would it take me to reach the destination?

But the more I am on it, the more I realize there probably is no “figuring it out” or any destination. There's no final state in this life where there is one Big “T” Truth, one catalog of knowledge. In some ways, it's a constant set of deconstruction and reconstruction to something higher, and better.

It brings new light to the idea that Jesus is the way. He's not the path to get there, but the way to follow, and keep following. That's what's strait and narrow about the path: it involves love, and growth. It's narrow because so few choose it.

Brian McClaren summed it up well, “God is not a destination. Like a river, like a road, God takes us somewhere. For that reason, the authentic experience of communion with God leads into communion with all of God's creations. The deeper we go into the love of God, the deeper we are led into all that God loves.”<sup>2</sup>

So, wherever your journey takes you, I hope you feel that love from God—and that love *for* all that God loves. That is flourishing. That is real peace.

Safe journey.

With warmth,

Your Friend

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<sup>2</sup> Brian McClaren, *Faith After Doubt*

P.S. I am glad I've had this time with you on your journey. As we part, I am not sure where the path takes us. But I am really glad to be on it—isn't that the exciting part? And, despite the pain, I am glad that you are on it too.

My hope is that these words are helpful to you on your road to becoming. Much love!

If you want to reach out, I'm at [letters4thejourney@gmail.com](mailto:letters4thejourney@gmail.com)

## List of Books and Podcasts

One final word. For years I have been reading extensively on theology, faith, LDS Church history, and more. I've listened to thousands of hours of podcast. I had always wished someone would provide a list of suggested titles.

So, here is my list of books and podcasts that have had the most impact on me.

### Nature of God / Grace / Relationship with God

- **Grace is Not God's Backup Plan by Adam Miller:** Explores the radical nature of grace as God's primary way of relating to humanity, not a secondary option when we fail.
- **Divine Grace by Adam Miller:** Delves deeper into the concept of divine grace, examining its transformative power and its role in our relationship with God.
- **The Mother Tree by Kathryn Knight Sonntag:** Uses the metaphor of a mother tree to explore nurturing divine love and our interconnectedness within God's creation.
- **The Christ Who Heals by Fiona and Terryl Givens:** Examines the healing power of Jesus Christ, extending beyond physical ailments to spiritual and emotional restoration.
- **The God Who Weeps by Fiona and Terryl Givens:** Explores the profound empathy and sorrow of God in the face of human suffering and the implications for our understanding of the divine.
- **All Things New by Fiona and Terryl Givens:** Offers a hopeful perspective on the transformative power of Christ's Atonement to make all things new in our lives.
- **The Universal Christ by Richard Rohr:** Presents a vision of Christ as a cosmic and unifying presence, extending beyond the historical Jesus to encompass all of creation.
- **The Crucible of Doubt: Reflections on the Quest for Faith by Fiona and Terryl Givens:** Explores the necessity and potential growth found within periods of doubt and questioning in one's faith journey.
- **Sacred Struggle by Melissa Inouye:** Examines the complex and often messy nature of faith, highlighting the value of wrestling with doubts and difficulties in our spiritual development.
- **At One Ment by Thomas McConkie:** Explores the principles of contemplative practice to foster a deeper sense of unity and connection with God and others.
- **Gracing by Hannah Packard Crowther:** Reflects on the subtle yet profound ways grace manifests in our daily lives, shaping our experiences and relationships.
- **The Language of God by Francis Collins:** A prominent geneticist shares his journey reconciling faith and science, arguing for the compatibility of belief in God and evolutionary biology.
- **Invisible Jesus: A Book About Leaving the Church and Looking for Christ by Scot McKnight and Tommy Preson Phillips:** Explores the path those who have deconstructed belief in their church while finding a deeper connection with Jesus Christ.

### Faith Journey

- **Field Notes for the Wilderness: Practices for an Evolving Faith by Sarah Bessey:** Offers practical spiritual practices for navigating the uncertainties and transformations of a maturing faith.
- **Wholehearted Faith by Rachel Held Evans:** Through personal narrative, Evans explores the challenges and beauty of holding onto faith in a world filled with doubt and complexity.
- **Faith After Doubt by Brian McLaren:** McLaren provides a framework for moving beyond simplistic certainty to a more resilient and nuanced faith that embraces questions.
- **Do I Stay Christian? by Brian McLaren:** Addresses the difficult questions many face regarding their Christian identity in a changing world, offering pathways for those wrestling with doubt.
- **Falling Upward by Richard Rohr:** Highly recommended. Outlines the two halves of life, suggesting that spiritual growth often involves a “falling” that leads to deeper understanding and faith.
- **Stages of Faith by James Fowler:** Presents a developmental model of faith, describing different stages individuals go through as their beliefs evolve throughout life.
- **Mere Christianity by C.S. Lewis:** A classic. Lewis offers a rational and accessible defense of core Christian beliefs, appealing to both believers and skeptics.
- **The Sin of Certainty by Peter Enns:** Enns challenges the notion that absolute certainty is a prerequisite for faith, arguing that embracing uncertainty can lead to a more authentic spirituality.
- **A Year of Biblical Womanhood by Rachel Held Evans:** Evans humorously and thoughtfully chronicles her experiment living according to biblical prescriptions for women, raising questions about interpretation and modern faith.
- **Evolving in Monkey Town by Rachel Held Evans:** Reflects on the tensions between faith and science in her own upbringing and broader culture, advocating for a more open and compassionate approach.
- **Faith Unraveled: How a Girl Who Knew All the Answers Learned to Ask Questions by Rachel Held Evans:** Evans shares her personal journey of deconstruction and reconstruction of faith as she learned to embrace doubt and complexity.
- **The Great Spiritual Migration by Brian McLaren:** Proposes an important shift in Christian focus from exclusion and fear to love, compassion, and global citizenship.
- **The Dark Night of the Soul by St. John of the Cross:** A classic of Christian mysticism, this work describes the difficult but ultimately purifying experience of spiritual desolation in the journey toward union with God.
- **Come Be My Light by Mother Teresa:** This collection of private letters reveals the spiritual struggles and profound faith of Mother Teresa, offering insight into her inner life.
- **Navigating Mormon Faith Crisis by Thomas McConkie:** McConkie provides guidance and frameworks for individuals experiencing doubt or disillusionment within the context of Mormonism.
- **Benefit of the Doubt: Breaking the Idol of Certainty by Gregory A. Boyd:** Boyd argues against the pursuit of absolute certainty in faith, suggesting that embracing doubt can lead to a more robust and honest relationship with God.



- **When Mormons Doubt: A Way to Save Relationships and Seek a Qualify Life by Jon Ogden:** Ogden offers practical advice and perspectives for navigating doubt within Mormonism while preserving relationships and personal well-being.

### The LDS Church Today

- **At Last She Said it (See also the podcast series):** Explores contemporary issues and perspectives within the Church, particularly from female voices.
- **Restoration: God's Call to the 21st-Century World by Patrick Mason:** Examines the ongoing relevance and potential of the Restoration in addressing the challenges and opportunities of our modern era.
- **Planted: Belief and Belonging in an Age of Doubt by Patrick Mason:** Explores how individuals can cultivate deep belief and belonging within the Church amidst an environment of questioning and uncertainty.
- **Proclaim Peace: The Restoration's Answer to an Age of Conflict by Patrick Mason and David Pulsipher:** Examines the peace-building potential of the Restoration's principles in a world marked by division and strife.
- **Bridges: Ministering to Those Who Question by David Ostler:** Provides insights and guidance for Church members seeking to understand and support those experiencing doubts or faith crises.
- **Without the Mask: Coming Out and Coming Into God's Light by Charlie Bird:** Bird shares his personal journey of navigating his identity as a gay Latter-day Saint and finding his place within the Church.
- **Expanding the Borders of Zion by Charlie Bird:** Explores ways to create a more inclusive and welcoming community within the Church for LGBTQ+ individuals.
- **Listen, Learn, and Love: Embracing LGBTQ Latter-day Saints by Richard Ostler:** Offers practical advice and his own personal story and the stories of LGBTQ+ saints to help Latter-day Saints better understand and show love to their LGBTQ+ brothers and sisters.
- **Listen, Learn, and Love: Building the Good Ship Zion by Richard Ostler:** Focuses on fostering a stronger and more compassionate Church culture that embraces diverse perspectives.
- **Listen, Learn, and Love: Improving Latter-day Saint Culture by Richard Ostler:** Addresses specific aspects of Church culture that could be improved to create a more inclusive and supportive environment.
- **The LDS Gospel Topics Series: A Scholarly Engagement by Matthew Harris:** Harris offers a scholarly analysis and contextualization of the official Gospel Topics essays published by the Church.
- **Letter to a Doubter by Terryl Givens:** Givens provides a thoughtful and personal response to common doubts and questions raised by those grappling with their faith in the Church.
- **Living on the Inside of the Edge: A Survival Guide by Chris Kimball:** A former bishop offers practical advice and insights for those who feel somewhat on the periphery of mainstream Mormonism but wish to remain connected.

## Personal Journey/Enlightenment

### Young Pueblo Books

- **The Way Forward:** Offers guidance and reflections on navigating life's challenges and finding direction.
- **Inward:** Focuses on introspection and exploring one's inner landscape for self-understanding.
- **Clarity and Connection:** Emphasizes the importance of clear thinking and fostering meaningful relationships.
- **Lighter:** Explores themes of releasing burdens and finding a sense of ease and peace.
- **How to Love Better:** Offers insights and practices for cultivating deeper and more meaningful love in relationships.

### Thich Nhat Hanh Books

- **Peace is Every Step:** Teaches mindfulness and how to find peace in the present moment through everyday activities.
- **The Art of Living:** Offers Buddhist wisdom and practices for living a more mindful, compassionate, and fulfilling life.
- **Fear: Essential Wisdom for Getting Through the Storm:** Explores the nature of fear and provides practices for understanding and transforming it.
- **The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching:** Presents a clear and accessible overview of core Buddhist principles and practices.
- **You Are Here:** Emphasizes the power of presence and connecting with the here and now.
- **Living Buddha, Living Christ:** Explores the common ground and shared wisdom between Buddhism and Christianity.

### Contemplative Christianity and Mystical Traditions

- **Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer by Richard Rohr:** Explores contemplative prayer as a way to experience the inherent belonging and love offered by God.
- **New Seeds of Contemplation by Thomas Merton:** Profound reflections on solitude, self-discovery, and the search for God in the contemplative life.
- **Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening by Cynthia Bourgeault:** Introduces the practice of Centering Prayer as a method for deepening one's awareness of the divine presence.
- **Becoming Rooted: One Hundred Days of Reconnecting with Sacred Earth by Randy Woodley:** Invites readers to reconnect with the natural world as a path to spiritual grounding and understanding.

### Love

- **The Law of Love by Steve Young:** Explores the central importance of love as a guiding principle in life and faith.

- **The Law of Love in Action by Steve Young:** Delves into the practical application of love in our interactions and relationships.

### **Rituals and Community**

- **The Power of Ritual: Turning Everyday Activities into Soulful Practices by Casper ter Kuile:** Explores how incorporating ritual into daily life can foster meaning and connection.
- **The Art of Gathering: How We Meet and Why it Matters by Priya Parker:** Offers principles and frameworks for creating more meaningful and transformative gatherings of people.
- **Find Your People: Building Deep Community in a Lonely World by Jenny Allen:** Explores the importance of genuine connection and provides insights on building strong communities.
- **The Art of Community: 7 Principles for Belonging by Charles H. Vogl:** Outlines key principles for fostering strong and meaningful communities where individuals feel a sense of belonging.
- **Awe by Dacher Keltner:** Explores the science and significance of awe in our lives, highlighting its power to connect us and enhance well-being.
- **For Small Creatures Such as We by Sasha Sagan:** Reflects on the wonder of the universe and the importance of finding meaning and connection in a secular world.

### **The Book of Mormon**

- **Studies of the Book of Mormon by B.H. Roberts:** Explores Robert's attempts to understand and reconcile various issues with the Book of Mormon to the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve.
- **The Annotated Book of Mormon by Grant Hardy:** Provides historical, literary, and cultural context alongside the text of the Book of Mormon to enhance understanding.
- **The Book of Mormon for the Least of These, Vol 1-3 by Margaret Olsen Hemming and Fatima Saleh:** This series offers interpretations of the Book of Mormon through a lens of social justice and empathy for marginalized communities.

### **Church History**

- **Rough Stone Rolling by Richard Bushman:** The best, most comprehensive and nuanced biography of Joseph Smith and the early history of the Latter-day Saint movement.
- **No Man Knows My History by Fawn Brodie:** Brodie's controversial biography offers a critical and psychological examination of Joseph Smith's life and claims.
- **The Ghost of Eternal Polygamy by Carol Lynn Pearson:** In my opinion this is a must read. Explores the lasting impact and complexities of the history of polygamy in the Church, particularly for women.
- **Second Class Saints by Matthew Harris:** Examines the experiences and perspectives of marginalized groups within the history of the Latter-day Saint Church.

- **Joseph Smith, The Rise and Fall of an American Prophet by John Turner:** A very readable biography of Joseph Smith who approaches him with a unique perspective as a non-LDS historian.

### Scriptures / Historical Christ

- **Misquoting Jesus by Bart D. Ehrman:** Ehrman, a New Testament scholar, discusses textual variations in the Bible and their implications for understanding the original texts.
- **The Wisdom Jesus by Cynthia Bourgeault:** Bourgeault explores the teachings of Jesus through the lens of contemplative wisdom traditions.
- **The Oxford Annotated Bible (NRSV):** This is a study Bible that provides scholarly introductions, annotations, and historical context for the biblical texts.
- **The Bible Says So by Dan McClellan:** Addresses common interpretations and misinterpretations of biblical texts, offering a more academically supported understanding of key topics.
- **The Bible Tells Me So: Why Defending Scripture Has Made Us Unable to Read it by Peter Enns:** Enns argues that a rigid defense of biblical inerrancy can hinder a more authentic engagement with the scriptures.

### Biographies / Memoir

- **Stretching the Heavens (Eugene England) by Terryl Givens:** Givens chronicles the life and intellectual contributions of Eugene England, a significant voice in Mormon thought.
- **David O. McKay and the Rise of Modern Mormonism, Gregory Prince:** Examines the life and leadership of David O. McKay and his role in shaping the modern Church.
- **Chosen Path: A Memoir by D. Michael Quinn:** Quinn shares his personal journey as a historian of Mormonism and his experiences within the Church.
- **Sacred Struggles by Melissa Inouye:** (Listed in multiple categories) Incorporates personal reflections on the complexities of faith and belonging.

### Emotional Resilience

#### Brené Brown Books

- **The Gifts of Imperfection:** Explores the power of embracing vulnerability and imperfection to live a wholehearted life.
- **Daring Greatly:** Encourages readers to embrace vulnerability as the foundation for courage and authentic living.
- **Rising Strong:** Outlines a process for navigating setbacks, learning from failures, and cultivating resilience.
- **Braving the Wilderness:** Examines the importance of belonging and connection while standing in our own truth, even when it's difficult.
- **Atlas of the Heart:** Explores the nuances of human emotions and experiences, providing a framework for understanding and connecting with ourselves and others.

## Other Key Titles

- **What Happened to You? by Oprah Winfrey & Bruce D. Perry:** Discusses the impact of trauma and adversity on our lives and offer insights into healing and resilience.
- **The Body Keeps the Score by Bessel van der Kolk:** Examines the effects of trauma on the brain and body and explores innovative approaches to healing.
- **Sacred Struggle by Melissa Inouye:** (Listed in multiple categories) Inouye's work touches on themes of personal resilience in the face of faith challenges.
- **Gracing by Hannah Packard Crowther:** (Listed in multiple categories) Crowther's reflections may offer insights into finding strength and hope through grace.
- **Shift by Ethan Kross:** Explores the science of managing our thoughts and emotions to improve well-being and performance.
- **Chatter by Ethan Kross:** Delves into the phenomenon of our inner voice and provides strategies for harnessing it for greater calm and self-control.
- **The Untethered Soul, the Journey Beyond Yourself by Michael Singer:** A guide to understanding the inner dialogue and achieving inner peace by detaching from limiting thoughts and emotions.
- **The Power of Regret by Daniel Pink:** Explores the often-misunderstood emotion of regret, arguing that it's not necessarily negative but can be a valuable signal that, when analyzed correctly, can lead to better decision-making and a more fulfilling life by illuminating what we value most.
- **Find Your People by Jennie Allen:** A guide to building deep, meaningful friendships in a culture of isolation, rooted in biblical principles and practical strategies.
- **Combating Cult Mind Control by Steven Hassan:** An important resource that explains how cults manipulate individuals. Explains the BITE model of understanding how cults control behavior and provides tools for recovery and helping others break free.
- **How to Know a Person by David Brooks:** An exploration into the art of truly seeing and understanding others to build stronger, more empathetic relationships.
- **Build the Life You Want: The Art and Science of Happiness by Arthur Brooks and Oprah Winfrey:** A blend of science and storytelling that offers practical steps for increasing happiness and emotional well-being.
- **From Strength to Strength: Finding Success, Happiness, and Sense of Purpose in the Second Half of Life by Arthur Brooks:** A roadmap for finding deeper purpose, contentment, and joy as we transition into the second half of life.

## Religion and Politics

- **The Righteous Mind by Jonathan Haidt:** Haidt explores the psychological foundations of moral and political beliefs, highlighting the role of intuition and group identity.
- **The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory by Tim Alberta:** Alberta examines the intersection of faith and politics in America, particularly within the evangelical Christian community.
- **Mormonism and White Supremacy by Joanna Brooks:** Brooks critically analyzes the historical and contemporary connections between Mormonism and ideologies of white supremacy.

### LDS-Oriented Podcasts

- ***Faith Matters***—Hosted by Tim and Aubrey Chavez Explores nuanced and progressive perspectives on Mormon faith and practice.
- ***Latter-Day Struggles***—**Valerie Hammaker** Uses experience as a faith transition coach to address the challenges and difficulties individuals face within the context of Mormonism.
- ***At Last She Said it***—**Cynthia Winward and Susan Hinkley**. This podcast features open and honest conversations about contemporary issues relevant to Mormon women (Related to the book of the same name).
- ***One Heart, One Mind***—Thomas McConkie Uses principles of mindfulness and contemplation to foster unity and understanding within the LDS Church community.
- ***Listen, Learn, and Love***—Richard Ostler podcast features discussions and stories related to LGBTQ+ inclusion and building a more loving Church culture. (Related to the books) This
- ***Year of Polygamy***—Lindsay Hansen-Park Starting from the Feminist Mormon Housewives podcast, it is an in-depth review into historical polygamist wives of Joseph Smith to its impact today.
- ***Data Over Dogma***—Dan McLellan Encourages a more evidence-based and less literalistic approach to religious understanding within an LDS context.

### Faith Transition/Thoughtful Spirituality Podcasts

- ***The Liturgists*** (especially older episodes) Explores faith, science, and art—broad but resonant with LDS deconstruction journeys.
- ***Unorthodox*** (by Tablet Magazine) A Jewish podcast, but often draws interesting parallels on tradition and modernity.
- ***On Being*** – *Krista Tippett* Conversations with thought leaders across spiritual traditions—many deeply resonant with those in transition.
- ***For the Love*** – *Jen Hatmaker* Especially her series on faith deconstruction and women's spirituality.
- ***Secular Buddhism***—Noah Rashera Explores ways to adopt the principles of Buddhism to be a better whatever-you-already-are.