

Answers to the Most Common Questions I Am Asked About Leaving Mormonism

bob mccue
June 20, 2004

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Table of Contents

Introduction 2

What is My Personal Background, and How Significant Was My Connection to Mormonism? ... 2

Why Do I Make My Experience with Mormonism a Matter of Public Record?..... 3

Why Did I Resign My Membership in the Mormon Church? 3

Why Did This Process Take So Long?..... 7

How Did My Mormon Friends and Relatives React to My Change of Faith?..... 9

What Do I Think of Organized Religion in General? 9

How Have My Religious Beliefs Evolved?10

Am I Becoming A Philosopher King?.....11

What Continues to Motivate My Writing and Internet Postings?12

Who or What is God?.....15

Who Was Jesus Christ?.....15

What Have I Lost By Abandoning My Religious Community?.....16

What Effect Might Publishing My Views Have Within the Mormon Community or on My Mormon Relationships?16

Have I Lost My "Soul" Because I Choose to Direct Myself Instead of Obeying Those Who Say They Have God's Authority?18

What Advice Does My Experience Offer to Those Who Are Changing Their Own Highly-Structured Belief Systems?19

What Is My Single Biggest "Issue" With the Mormon Church?21

Is the "Faithful History" Policy Something that Mormons are Formally Taught?.....26

Does the Mormon Church Hurt Its Members or Pose a Risk to the Public?26

In a Nutshell - "Sound Bites" That Describe My Most Fundamental Problems with Mormonism28

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Introduction

I receive a fairly steady flow of email and other communication related to my experience with Mormonism. The following is my attempt to answer some of the most common questions that are put to me in this regard.

What is My Personal Background, and How Significant Was My Connection to Mormonism?

I was born in 1958 in Edmonton, where my father was attending university. My father and mother were born in Cardston and Raymond respectively. The family includes seven children of whom I am the eldest.

Some of my ancestors joined the Mormon Church during Joseph Smith's day. One great grandmother was the fourth polygamous wife of William Paxman, a high ranking Mormon leader in Utah. When he died in an accident, she came as a near penniless widow with three small children to the Raymond, Alberta area to homestead in about 1900. She was not legally entitled to share in her husband's considerable estate because she was not his legal wife. For reasons unknown to me, the legal wife was not prepared to share.

My other three sets of great grandparents also pioneered Alberta around 1900. Two of them were Mormon and settled in southern Alberta. The last - the McCues - were not Mormon and pioneered Vermillion and Ponoka.

My parents moved from Edmonton, to Lethbridge, to Utah and finally Victoria, B.C. while my father completed his education. He received a PhD in history from Brigham Young University, and took a teaching position at the University of Victoria, in Victoria, B.C. Canada, in its History Department. He retired a few years ago. Victoria continues to be one of my favorite places.

I attended high school in Victoria, but due to my inability there to be obedient to Mormon behavioral dictates, moved to Raymond, Alberta for most of grades 11 and 12. While there I played basketball for the Raymond Comets and learned a lot of useful things about work while living with my mother's oldest brother on the farm where they were both raised.

After graduating from high school I attended one semester of university and then served a two year mission for the Mormon Church in Peru from 1977-79. On my return I re-entered university. Eventually, I graduated from the University of Alberta in 1985 with three degrees (BA; MBA; LLB) with the highest distinction awarded in each case.

My wife and I married and were sealed in the Mormon temple at Cardston, Alberta in 1980 and had our first child ten months later. We now have seven children, and one grandchild. They are a continual source of joy and challenge for us.

I practice taxation related law. For the first ten years of my career we lived in Vancouver where I was a partner in a large law firm, and then we moved to Calgary where I found a similar position. I enjoy my work. The critical thinking skills it has helped me develop are largely responsible for my change in perspective with regard to Mormonism.

Our move to Calgary was motivated largely by my largely unconscious, at that point, concern with the lifestyle that activity in the Mormon Church's lay leadership system created for us in Vancouver. Calgary afforded more opportunity to do things with my family, decompress from the time and psychological requirements of Mormon lay leadership, and begin to find a personal equilibrium.

While I was a member of the Mormon Church I served in a variety of time consuming leadership positions including many years as a Scout Master, Young Mens President and Aaronic Priesthood Quorum leader. I served a five year term as Bishop, and until just over two years ago was serving as the Stake Mission President of the Calgary Stake.

Why Do I Make My Experience with Mormonism a Matter of Public Record?

The Golden Rule (do to others as you would have them do to you) continues to be one of my primary behavioral guides. I feel that I would have greatly benefited had senior members of the LDS community been prepared to frankly address their concerns with regard to Mormon history and cultural practices when I was in my late teens, early twenties, or at any other time thereafter. Regrettably, the influence of the Mormon Church over its members is such that this kind of frank, sincere, expression of belief and feeling is virtually non-existent within Mormon culture.

I also feel that were I thinking about becoming a Mormon, I would greatly benefit from the kind of information I have published. And finally, if I had loved ones who were either Mormons, or on the fringe of Mormonism, I would benefit from the kind of information I am about to share. Hence, although the publication of my views may make some people uncomfortable, and may create some friction in some of my relationships, I feel that it was the right thing to do.

Why Did I Resign My Membership in the Mormon Church?

I should first say that I continue to have great respect for the vast majority of my Mormon family and friends. These are well-intentioned, intelligent people who generally have high standards in terms of honesty, neighborliness, etc.

Leaving Mormonism was a process that lasted at least 15 years, but only the last dramatic bit was visible to me or anyone else without the benefit of hindsight. I was 44 years old when I resigned my membership. This occurred 18 months ago. I had served in numerous leadership positions within the Mormon community, including that of Bishop, which is the lay leader of a congregation. Mormons do not have a paid clergy.

In short, I grew out of Mormonism and have a personality that caused me to stand up, be counted, and leave instead of quietly withdrawing to the fringes as do most who experience what I did. A Mormon friend called me shortly after I resigned my membership and said, in effect, "I thought you were smart, so A) Why did this take you so long to figure out?; and B) Why did you do it in such a difficult way?"

The three primary issues that brought the process to a head were as follows:

First, a few months before leaving Mormonism I started reading Mormon history as the professional historians write it for the first time. I quickly realized that my religious leaders had misled me as to how Mormonism started, and hence what it was, and that this pattern of Mormon leadership deception goes back to Mormonism's beginnings with Joseph Smith.

For many years the Mormon Church has suppressed as many of the troubling aspects of its history as possible. This is done pursuant to a policy, unknown to most members, of only teaching versions of its history that will be "faith promoting". This policy is called the "faithful history" policy, and owes its existence to Mormon leaders' concern that if the reality of Mormonism's foundations were widely understood, fewer people would accept their authority.

As I read statements from Mormonism's current leaders ordering the suppression of information I felt physically ill. It took weeks of reading and thinking to come to grips with the reality that men who I had trusted completely, and at whose request I had given literally years of my life in volunteer service, had consciously misled me and millions like me. I did not want to believe this, and tried as hard as I could to find information that would justify rejecting it.

Perhaps the most difficult thing for me to understand was the gulf between the conduct of Mormon leaders as just indicated, and the many statements of Mormon leaders, from Joseph Smith forward, indicating the importance of the pursuit of truth, freedom of conscience, etc. These teachings were the core of my belief system. It was crushing to discover that the behavior of Mormon leaders was so far from what they taught. The effect of the statements respecting honesty etc. as they are now taught by the Mormon church was to cause me, and I am sure many others, to lower our guard and trust our religious leaders. This trust was then horribly abused. It would not surprise me if this at some point becomes the basis for legal action against the Mormon Church. Its ethical standards in terms of honesty and disclosure fall far short of those to which even people like used car salesmen are held in our society.

The suppressed aspects of Mormon history that most troubled me indicated many instances in which Mormon leaders have deceived both their followers and the public about important matters. Joseph Smith was the worst in this regard. Once I understood his history, I felt that it was unwise to believe anything he said when attempting to persuade people to do what he wanted them to do. His tendency to exaggerate or lie when in a tight spot bears a striking resemblance to the practices of shady stock promoters I have on occasion met relative to my legal practice. Such people are not to be trusted, regardless of how persuasive they sound.

I was particularly distressed by Smith's practice of using his authority as a religious leader to persuade women, including many who were already married and young teenage girls, to have sex with him. Smith denied the rumors that swirled around him in this regard for well over a decade, and eventually said that God instructed him to lie because the people were not ready to hear the "truth" – that polygamy was God's eternal law and that all who wished salvation must obey it.

It is my view that simple promiscuity on Joseph Smith's part morphed into Mormon polygamy when he was found out. That is, his stature in the early Mormon community as God's mouthpiece allowed him to justify his personal sexual practices in a manner that legitimized it for all. This might be a horrifying example of what social scientists call the "law of unintended consequences". Adam Smith's "invisible hand" is a more positive example – many people each pursuing their own self interest create a market that causes an efficient distribution of goods and

services, and encourages all to be productive. The unintended consequence of Joseph Smith's position as a religious leader, and his satisfying his sexual appetite in the way the alpha male of human groups have from time immemorial, was that he had to justify his sexual exploits in a way that brought the practice of polygamy into a community. This lasted for decades, shaped countless lives in many ways – most negative in my view – and caused immense suffering and loss of intimacy.

The main features of this sordid chapter in Mormon history are not disputed by knowledgeable Mormon leaders or scholars, when put on the spot. The facts are confirmed by multiple reliable sources, including affidavits given by many of Smith's "spiritual wives" that the Church itself collected shortly after he died. Mormons, at that time, were proud of polygamy. These affidavits settled a dispute with a splinter group as to when, and how, polygamy was practiced. Mormon scripture today teaches that polygamy will be required of those who dwell with God in the highest realm of heaven, all of whom will be Mormon. Ironically, throughout most of Smith's life while he practiced polygamy, Mormon scripture expressly forbid it. This was part of the "people are not ready for the truth yet" public relations program Smith was running in those days.

As I write this, I marvel for the thousandth time at the social mechanisms used to draw me and so many others into the Mormon ruse. Information truly is power. I was persuaded from my boyhood up that I had all of the information relevant to my religious reality, and those who controlled the information I received controlled that aspect of my life, which now that I have emerged from the fog I can see was a much larger portion of my existence that I would have guessed.

Second, when I made my beliefs known, I was told by the Mormon leadership that while I could believe pretty much what I wanted and remain a member of the Mormon Church, I could not speak to anyone outside of my immediate family about the things I had discovered, regardless of their historical legitimacy. This deeply troubled me. I doubted that I could in good conscience continue to be a member of any organization that operated in this fashion.

And third, I thought that even if Mormonism were not what it purports to be, it was possible that it was still a worthwhile institution. So, I conducted the most careful study I could of the various significant Mormon teachings that have from time to time distinguished it from other religions, and compared them to the wisdom produced by science and other faiths during the same periods of time. This study persuaded me that my family and I would likely be much better off not following the advice offered by Mormon leaders.

I am no longer certain about anything. But after carefully considering the foregoing, I decided that I did not wish to be further associated with the Mormon Church, despite still having great respect and feeling for many individual members of that organization. As one might guess, this decision put significant stress on many of my family and other close relationships within the Mormon community.

I have had conversations with a few Mormons who are aware of much of the information I am, and feel that their needs are adequately met by Mormonism. I respect their opinion, and acknowledge that in some cases this may well be the case. What works for one individual as a result of personality type, and a variety of other factors, may well differ from what works for another. I also note that recent economic research indicates that the underdeveloped parts of the world, some authoritarian religious structures seem to help produce economic growth that helps many people. This is the very kind of religion that many (such as me) reject as unhelpful

in the developed world. Here we have further evidence that what does not work in terms of religious belief in one case may work in another. However, what works, and what is "true", are of course quite different things.

The important question respecting the relationship between a believer and his church is, "who is using whom?" If the Mormon Church serves the people and helps them to become what they have chosen, and does not cost too much relative to the benefits it provides, that is great. Far too often in the case of Mormonism and other similarly authoritarian religious organizations, the interests of the individual are subservient to those of the institution. So, the church uses the individual.

I note two other things in this regard. First, cognitive dissonance theory as described below likely plays a role in our perception of how well our religious institution serves our interests. And second, adult participants who are fully aware of Mormon history and its authoritarian nature are protected from harm largely by that awareness. Young people, and particularly those who are in the process of developing their critical reasoning capacity, are not so protected and are in my view likely to be intellectually impaired if conditioned to think as the Mormon Church would have them. They will likely be taught many things that are the equivalent of not being allowed to question the existence of Santa Claus, or even seek any information that could cause the question to arise.

When I refer to Mormon religious leaders, by the way, I have in mind those at or near the top of the Mormon Church. Most Mormon leaders at the local level are honest laymen engaged in community service. They, generally, have no idea respecting the issues I am describing. They are kept in the dark, in my view, so that they will pass on the deception just noted believing it to be the truth. I was in this position for over 20 years myself. Mormon missionaries are in the same boat, as are Mormon parents who unwittingly teach falsehood to their children. This is reminiscent of the manufacturing company Board of Directors that makes the decision not to inform its marketing department of fundamental product engineering defects since that would take the wind out of their sales effort.

I should also note that the religious leaders of whom I am critical are, for the most part, well-intentioned, good people who exude warmth and love. That is largely why the process of discovering their error is so difficult. These wonderful people believe that they are doing God's will by misleading their followers. In this regard, they follow a long line of societal leaders. Nietzsche said that the "pious lie" – that is, the lie told with the intent of doing good – is the foundation of all priesthoods. Plato taught that the "philosopher kings" – the wise few who lead – had a moral obligation to mislead the ignorant masses who were incapable of making good choices.

Humans tend to abuse power. Democratic processes are the best restraint we have in this regard. Mormonism, ironically, was relatively democratic in its beginnings, but became increasingly autocratic as time passed.

I recently read a partial transcript of the last hour at Jonestown, while Jim Jones' followers were committing mass suicide. They tape recorded a meeting at which they each praised Jones while drinking cyanide laced Kool-Aid. This man was well-intentioned, and his followers loved him, credited him with assisting them in manifold ways, and believed him when he said that it time for all of them to leave earth and go to a better place God had prepared for them. This happened, not coincidentally in my view, at a time when Jones seemed to believe that the community he led was likely to be broken up by government intervention. This illustrates the

ultimate preference of the institutional (or leadership) interest over that of the individual – "If I can't have this community, no one will!" The same has been said by estranged husbands before killing former wives and children, and it is rooted in the same control and power oriented pathology. This extreme behavior seems to differ only in degree from that of religious leaders who distort information against the interest of their followers, in order to keep them "in the fold".

I do not suggest that Mormon or other religious leaders are as dangerous as Jim Jones. I do suggest what is obvious to all except those who believe in a particular religious leader: that good intentions, charisma and the ability to cause people to trust do not evidence divine inspiration. They are, however, important tools in the art of persuading self and others that one has divine inspiration. And as I will attempt to explain below, there seems to be a human tendency to believe in the divine inspiration of our leaders, while recognizing the folly of such belief in others.

Why Did This Process Take So Long?

I have often shaken my head over that one. I am, after all, a reasonably well educated if rather slow witted fellow. One Calgarian friend suggested in jest (I think) that the problem was likely that my university degrees are all from the U. of A., in Edmonton (Calgary's rival city). Another suggested (likely not in jest) that I am wonderful proof of how linear in their thinking lawyers tend to be.

I think two issues nicely explain my experience. First, the psychologists make it clear that the forces of cognitive dissonance are far more powerful than most of us wish to believe (See for example, Shermer, "Why People Believe Weird Things"; Aronson, "The Social Animal"; and Levine, "The Power of Persuasion"). That is, once we have a particular belief lodged in our head, and we have built our life around it in terms of family and social relationships, we will be highly resistant to any information that suggests our belief to be incorrect. A number of examples of how thoroughly cognitive dissonance can block information in a variety of religious contexts are summarized starting at page 43 of an essay titled "Religious Faith: Enlightening or Blinding?" and in another titled "The Mormon Use of Persuasive Technique", both of which can be found under the Spirituality (Post-Mormon) button on my website (<http://mccue.cc/bob/spirituality.htm>).

Second, the Mormon Church enhances the power of cognitive dissonance within its membership by suppressing all troubling aspects of its history in the manner noted above. And, Mormons are taught that those who write the "real" history of Mormonism are not trustworthy. Because obedience to leadership authority is paramount within modern Mormonism, I chose not to read anything that questioned my religious leaders or the beliefs they approved. Most faithful Mormons do likewise. And so I made it to age 44 in a state of almost complete ignorance respecting the most important aspects of Mormon history and culture formation, and hence the information most relevant to whether the spectacular claims Mormonism makes with respect to exclusive divine authority, and hence being God's "only" true church on earth, are justifiable. Ironically, I considered myself well informed respecting Mormonism and religion in general, and was looked up to within the local Mormon community in that regard.

James Fowler' book "Stages of Faith" describes six stages of spirituality and how many people progress through them. This book has also helped me to make sense of my experience.

The third stage Fowler describes is the "my faith is the best or only true faith". People in this stage make great followers, and so it is encouraged by many institutional religions, including

Mormonism. The fourth stage is the realization that many aspects of one's faith do not square with reality, and involves a painful reappraisal of belief, often followed by a rejection of it. The fifth is a joyful, wondrous stage in which the good of many faiths is appreciated and spirituality becomes less bounded, more flexible. Often during this stage one is able to reappraise, and reconnect with, one's "old" faith. In this case, however, it usually becomes part of a much broader, richer spiritual tapestry. I note in this regard that my personal spirituality continues to be informed by many of Mormonism's basic teachings.

My overall summary of how the evolution of faith works is as follows: Our religious beliefs are supported by social networks, our conditioning, education, etc. Cognitive dissonance results whenever any information challenges those beliefs. This is, in effect, a weight that holds our existing religious beliefs in place regardless of whether they are correct.

Whether we can overcome that cognitive dissonance, and how long that will take, depends on our ability to learn and change, as determined by genetics and conditioning. Michael Shermer in his book "How We Believe" cites extensive social science research that shows that the more open a person is to new experience, as measured by a personality trait called "openness", the more likely it is that she will become less certain or more liberal in her religious views as time passes. I have collected data in the post-Mormon community online that indicates that certain Meyers-Briggs personality types are more likely to question their religious beliefs than others. Particularly, those who are introverted (as opposed to extroverted); intuitive (as opposed to sensing); and thinking (as opposed to feeling) are more likely to seriously question Mormonism. My data sample size and the manner in which it was collected, however, were such that these conclusions are tentative at best. I am in the process of preparing a larger and more reliable survey that will address the same issue.

Our psychology seems to be designed to promote stability – to cause us not to change social groups unless the cost benefit advantages are obvious, and often not even then. This makes sense in light of the importance of being part of a well functioning group to our survival throughout most of humankind's evolutionary history. Hence, the threat of expulsion from our primary social group causes profound fear. This buttresses cognitive dissonance and makes information that challenges our beliefs more difficult to rationally evaluate. This irrational fear of leaving the group is exploited to a tee by Mormonism and other similar groups.

It takes a massive amount of learning for even a personality type predisposed toward change to overcome the weight I have described in the case of a well-conditioned Mormon. I visualize this as an old fashioned set of scales, like the scales of justice. Disconfirming experience and evidence has to be piled on the side of our scales opposite religious belief until they begin to tip. That is, we have to experience enough cognitive dissonance to make us finally question the reality we have assumed to exist. The epiphany experience many people have as they leave a controlling religious faith is related to what happens when we reach the "tipping point" on our scale. Then, suddenly, it is as if a switch were thrown and we can see all kinds of things that have been building up just out of view as a result of the work our mind has been doing to keep us in denial. Suddenly, much of this information and insight is released into the conscious mind because the unconscious can no longer hold it back. It is as if the lights suddenly came on. This experience changes most people irrevocably. Afterwards, they can perhaps fake being who they were, but they are and always will be different in fundamental ways.

For the reasons just indicated, I doubt very much that I could have thought my way out of Mormonism without several years of decompression after my stint as Bishop, which ended just over a decade ago. I needed that much time, space and energy to slowly take weight off the

Mormon side of the scale and to experience cognitive dissonance producing things that would add weight to the other side.

And, perhaps most importantly, I needed time to become sentient again. I was so busy for so long that I no longer felt much outside of a narrow range of the emotional spectrum. It was the realization that something had died inside of me that got my conscious attention first. I was depressed but not so badly that I could be diagnosed as such. I went to various doctors, assuming that something was physically wrong with me. I checked out clean in each case. Only as I emerged from Mormonism did my vitality come back.

The term "rebirth" is often applied to this process. I think it is apt.

How Did My Mormon Friends and Relatives React to My Change of Faith?

Most of my Mormon friends and family have gone out of their way to be understanding and continue to be friendly. I am very grateful for that. However, what I have done is terrifying to your average faithful Mormon, and on many occasions I have felt their discomfort with my presence. This has also caused some friendships to cease. But these were friendships of the conditional sort, and have been replaced with other relationships that seem more authentic.

The fear many Mormons have when confronted by someone who does what I have done is also responsible, I suspect, for rumors that circulated after I left the Mormon Church. These included things like I had been involved in an extra-marital affair (I heard several possible candidates mentioned – they were likely even less amused than was I), or was addicted to Internet pornography. In the Mormon way of thinking, if I did something like that it would cause me to "lose the Spirit" and so explain my otherwise inexplicable behavior. This is a type of cognitive dissonance coping strategy that is well documented in the psychological literature. It enables faithful Mormons to avoid confronting the reality that someone who was once a respected leader within their religious community had studied, prayed, meditated etc. and decided on that basis alone that he should no longer believe as they do.

I should also note, and take some responsibility for, certain negative changes in some of my most intimate relationships. Mormonism is such a pervasive influence in the lives of faithful Mormons that until it is gone, one cannot appreciate the extent to which relationships depend upon it. There are some cases in which it is painful for me to be in the company of people with whom I used to have close relationships. All we seem able to do is exchange banalities because their lives are still so fully occupied with Mormonism and its unquestionable "truthfulness", and my life is now so different. The constant reminder of this loss of intimacy is painful, and has caused us to avoid each other to a degree. I hope that as the shock that my insistence on addressing reality has created dissipates, both in me and in them, that these relationships will find a new rason d'etre. It has, after all, only been about 18 months since my family and closest friends found out about these changes in my life and I think some still believe I will "come out of it" and my life will return to its former state.

What Do I Think of Organized Religion in General?

It is a wide range of different things. My experience with Mormonism has spawned in me a deep, and I think healthy, distrust for people who purport to speak with certainty for God. In fact, I feel this same distrust for those who are certain, and hence close minded, about anything. I would even say that I am not certain that Mormonism is "wrong", that Joseph Smith did not speak with God, etc. I think that once the evidence is considered, it is highly probable that most

of Mormonism's foundational claims are false and that Mormon leaders have given, and continue to give, bad advice in many respects. But I remain open to the possibility that I am wrong, and am prepared to examine any evidence my Mormon friends care to show in me in that regard.

As I have studied other institutional religions, I have observed that a continuum exists with dogmatic/literal institutions at one end, and metaphoric/open minded ones at the other. Mormonism falls at the dogmatic end of this spectrum. The dogmatic faiths are often those that have grown most rapidly during the past several decades. I agree with those scholars who think that this is likely a social reaction to the increasing uncertainty that exists respecting many aspects of modern life. That is, many people wish to be told that if they follow a certain formula, "Everything will be just fine", and so religions that say that are attractive to them.

I believe that while all religions do some good and some ill, those at the metaphoric/open minded end of the spectrum tend to do more good and less ill, whereas the reverse is true at the dogmatic/literal end. I also recognize that different personality types require more, or less, structure and so the choice of a spiritual path should be personal in nature. There is no one spiritual way that is best for all. And, most of us evolve from dogmatism in our insecure youth toward a more metaphoric spirituality as we mature. The best spiritual paths accommodate and encourage this growth. And it is important to note that religious belief and spirituality are based on trust. It hence seems that any religious institution that will not be honest with its members should be avoided.

One of the most useful tools I have discovered in terms of understanding how religion interfaces with culture in general is the World Value Survey, conducted by the University of Michigan. Visual summaries of the most recent data can be accessed at <http://wvs.isr.umich.edu/fig.shtml>. This largely explains, for example, why Mormonism and other Christian religions are successful in their missionary efforts in some parts of the world, and not in others. The data in this survey also provides the best support I have seen for the well known idea that a religion is largely a reflection of the segment of society in which it flourishes. Or as Goethe put it:

As man is
So is his God
And thus is God
Oft strangely odd.

The same applies to non-religious dogmatic ideologies, such as communism of certain types.

How Have My Religious Beliefs Evolved?

When scientific evidence reaches a certain level of credibility, it enlightens my religious beliefs. Galileo showed nicely how this happens. But science can speak only to "hows", not to "whys".

I consider myself to be a Christian at the liberal end of the spectrum, and seek wisdom there, as well as in other faith traditions, literature, philosophy, speaking with my children, the sound of my own breath and heartbeat, etc. There I find my "whys" and recognize this for the act of faith in an uncertain world that it is. And so, I continually seek to be taught – to better grasp both these whys and the many wonders each passing moment offers.

My most important value is that each human being is of equal worth and deserves equal opportunity. The golden rule continues to be my basic behavioral guide. And I particularly like the Buddhist statement,

We, plain ordinary Buddhists, will keep on removing selfishness, seeking the light that is everywhere, practicing loving kindness that does not contradict or discriminate. Says an ancient sage, "The Way is near, and thou seekest it afar." Why, then, shall we ever attempt to walk away from the path which extends right in front of us, so wide and well paved?

The manner in which we come to "know" things is of critical importance. It is dangerous to trust the kind of emotional feelings that I was taught would enable me "know" that certain things happened, or will happen. An example of such a belief is that there is a real and wonderful place called the Celestial Kingdom into which only obedient Mormons, or those who after death have become obedient Mormons, will be permitted to live. Those who are obedient enough to Mormon authority to live in the Celestial Kingdom will do so with their families, which will include in many cases (some Mormons say all cases) more than one wife per husband. All who are not "worthy" to live in the Celestial Kingdom will live alone – that is, outside the kind of intimacy families provide.

Many of the feelings just described and the knowledge or beliefs they support can be traced to the cognitive dissonance process noted above. And yet, many of my most important decisions were made on the basis of those feelings. I now regret that in many ways, and hope that my children will make their decisions on a wiser basis.

A review of history, or even current affairs, shows us all kinds of people who are certain that they are right about conflicting beliefs. That is, they "know" they are right and others are wrong while at the same time those others are equally certain they are right and the first group is wrong. Both cannot be right because their beliefs conflict. And yet each is certain and immovable in their position, on the basis of emotional experience that is beyond questioning even when faced with highly reliable, disconfirming evidence. This kind of emotion based certainty is the cause of much of what troubles our world. Ironically, we can easily spot this deficiency in others, but cannot in ourselves. The psychologists tell us that the more complex a decision and the more fear is related to it, the more likely we are to conclude that whatever our group decides is "true" regardless of the evidence. So, most people believe that all religions, other than their own, are "weird". That is, they are under the control of the dominant ideology in their groups, as the psychologists would predict.

It is hard to face the fact that often when we think we are being rational, we are not. I try to use the perspectives of others to help me double check my instincts especially in circumstances that are likely to inflame my emotions. Anything that challenges our religious beliefs is a classic example of this type of case. It is ironic that we should trust outsiders in cases that are among the most personal or intimate in our experience. But once we understand the clearly demonstrable effect of cognitive dissonance on our decision making capacity respecting emotionally charged issues, there is no question that this is what we should do. For the same reason, medical doctors are advised not to diagnose or treat members of their own families.

Am I Becoming A Philosopher King?

The philosopher kings were the wise few who Plato felt were justified in deceiving the masses since only the wise few were incapable of understanding what was in the masses' best interest.

Human history discloses a gradual reduction of the power of philosopher kings such as feudal lords, dictators and some religious leaders, and an empowerment of everyman. The printing press was a big part of this process. The birth and expansion of democracy is central to it and is an express rejection of the philosopher king model. Communications media have propelled the expansion of democratic principles for decades, and now the Internet is further accelerating that expansion. This will continue to put pressure on any organization that, in philosopher king fashion, depends on information control to maintain its power base. The growth patterns of the Mormon Church seem to indicate that it is feeling this pressure.

I don't think I am becoming a philosopher king since I am not a leader of any group and so am not in a position to suppress the information that flows to other people. In fact, I work against philosopher kings by making information available by way of my website, and by answering questions put to me by email or on bulletin boards so as to point people toward some of the wonderful sources of information we now have available to us. And I expressly disclaim the kind of certainty that philosopher kings have always used to persuade their uncertain followers. They say that they know best, and so must be followed. I say I don't know, but am trying to learn and will gladly share that path with anyone who is headed in more or less the same direction.

What Continues to Motivate My Writing and Internet Postings?

I continue to read and write mostly in an effort to build a more reliable foundation for my life – something that will continue to fill my life with joy and that I will feel proud to pass on to my children. I tell them, by the way, not to do what I have done, but to seek what I have sought in terms of the best connection to reality they can find, and what will help them bring into being the things they have chosen to value. I want them to find their own way, and not to mimic me. They are not me, and will no doubt find things that work for them better than what I have found works for me in that regard.

The process of reworking my worldview has been one of the most rewarding, exciting things I have ever done. We don't learn unless we have questions. Hence, once we think we "know", learning stops. Maybe we can still memorize more facts related to what we "know", but we don't learn things of importance.

Once my Mormon certainty fell away, I began to seriously question the things most well educated people work through in university: What does life mean?; What happens after death?; What do I value, and why?; Are my values justifiable?; etc. This felt like plugging into 220 volts. I read books respecting a wide variety of things relevant to my questions at an amazing (for me) pace. I woke up early most mornings with new ideas spinning through my head, and in some cases almost ran to the computer to spill them out before they slipped away. On a regular basis, while driving, walking or doing other things that left my mind at rest, I would be overcome by an almost tear inducing feeling of gratitude for the wonders that had suddenly and surprisingly burst into my life. I became more alive than at any other time in my life, and still feel that way. Fowler describes this as a common feature of the transition into stage five spirituality.

I think I have the foundation building part of my task more or less completed now, and while the epiphanies still come, they are less frequent. However, I recognize that mental habits die slowly, and what I am doing amounts to rewiring my head as well as building a new worldview. I am rewiring by rejecting, allowing to fall into disuse and then grow over, the neural pathways I do not want, and running a continual stream of thought over the neural pathways I wish to develop. What I call my "magical Mormon worldview", for example, is falling into disuse and growing over. My intellect, and the more rigorous thought patterns that go with it, is asserting

itself as a result of the exercise I continue to give it. I am likely to continue to exercise in this way. But, as time passes I expect to have less to do with Mormonism and more to do with things that have broader application to our society.

The last thing that drives my reading and writing is the gratitude I feel toward those who helped me along while I was working through my fear and cognitive dissonance, and getting ready to leave the Mormon herd. I doubt that I could have done that without the information and support provided by the Internet based community of post-Mormons. The Mormon Church's policy of suppressing the communication of dissent, and then removing from membership those who insist upon voicing dissent, amounts to a divide and conquer strategy. The Internet is ideally suited to counteract this in a variety of ways. Some of the people, for example, who were most supportive of my changing beliefs are disbelieving Mormons who still attend church for social reasons.

I have received hundreds of emails or phone calls during the past several months alone from fringe or post-Mormons all over the world, as well as connecting countless times in other ways with similar people through Internet bulletin boards. Most are well-educated, thoughtful, interesting folk. Almost all have seemed well-intentioned. As noted above, while I was working through my most fragile stage of the process, some of these people supported me. I am now taking my turn to support others who are at a similar transition point. I do this by making information that I have been told is helpful available on my website, by participating in a variety of post-Mormon bulletin boards, by answered email messages and by speaking with the odd person by telephone. I was surprised not long ago when my phone rang and I found myself speaking to someone from Sweden. He and I now have a lively correspondence that I expect will continue indefinitely. I answered an email this morning from Norway, and looked on a bulletin board at a message sent to me by one of my favorite people in Scotland. I have several friends in Australia, and one in Korea. Last year I met a friend in Tucson with whom I continue to correspond, and now in a more meaningful way since our face to face meeting. A distant relative who stumbled upon my website has gotten in touch with me. Next weekend I will be with an eclectic group at a retreat we have organized in Vermont where many of us will meet face to face for the first time. Etc. I feel that I have made many friends who will become more meaningful to me as time passes, as well as having had contact with many others in a transitory, but still deeply meaningful way.

I am reminded of a piece of needlework a friend once gave my wife. It reads something like,

Some people come into our lives
and quickly go.

Some people move our souls to dance.
They awaken us
to new understanding
with the passing whisper of their wisdom.

Some people make
the sky more beautiful to gaze upon.
They stay in our lives for awhile,
leave footprints on our hearts
And we are never, ever the same.

The latter two paragraphs capture the nature of my experience with many people I have met on-line, and a few I have met in person and by telephone, within the post-Mormon community. I have often been surprised at the speed and depth at which I connect with these people. I think that this is due to range of emotion and meaning that is attached to the issues with which we must deal while working through that period of fear and uncertainty that is required of those who change their foundational religious beliefs. To be part of that process is to mid-wife the birth (or rebirth) of a soul. This is sacred ground, and even brief encounters on it have deep meaning.

This reminds me of something one of my still faithful Mormon friends told me some time ago. We have been friends – close friends – for over 20 years. He is respected as a Mormon history authority in our community. After I had studied Mormonism carefully enough that I had serious concerns that I could not answer, I went to him for help and discovered that I was already well past the point to which his understanding took him. His interest was then piqued, and for several months we spent hours each week on the phone talking through various issues.

At one point during this process, he told me that he had read about three different kinds of conversations. The first, most shallow and most common, is talk about other people. This is usually little more than gossip. The second is talk about important events. This is usually news and is often useful. And the third, and by far the most unusual, is talk about important meanings and values.

My friend then asked me if I could remember any time in our lengthy and worthwhile friendship, prior to the commencement of my spiritual metamorphosis, when we had spoken about things related to meaning. I thought for a moment and had to admit that I could not. He could not either, but we agreed that since my questioning began that is virtually all we talked about, and that we both hungered for chances to speak more about meaningful things. Then we both puzzled over this seemingly incongruent set of facts – that a rejection of Mormon belief could radically upgrade the nature of our relationship, while he continued to believe (more or less) and I did not.

The reason for this is now clear to me. As faithful Mormons, we did not have questions about meaning. And if we did, we looked up the answers. There was little to talk about. But after I raised questions neither of us could answer, we had lots to talk about and those conversations fed us both in deeply satisfying ways even when we did not find answers we with which we could agree. And most importantly, as we together sought meaning, a sense of intimacy was created in a matter of hours that 20 years of Mormon friendship had failed to produce.

While interacting with people who are trying to sort out their beliefs respecting Mormonism, I try to be careful not to leave the impression that I am telling them what to do or believe. But, I am prepared to share my experience and reading materials that I have found useful with those who are struggling through the issues I have dealt with, and wish them well as they try to carve something that will work for them out of this ephemeral thing we call reality. The single most common comment I have received from people who have read material on my website is that I have put into words what they have felt, but could not quite articulate. We are all human beings, and many of us react in similar fashion when put in similar situations.

Most people move through this reading, writing, posting-on-the-Internet stage of the process and on to other things. I expect that will occur in my case. But I am not in a rush. I have been too rushed throughout most of my life. I am learning to slow down and just enjoy the present experience.

Who or What is God?

I should note in this regard that the same critical tools that helped me to understand how Mormonism works have also caused me to see other religious movements differently than I did before. The cognitive dissonance theory I outlined above explains, I believe, why many people (and particularly evangelical Christians) who are rabidly anti-Mormon do not realize that precisely the same analysis that “unveils” Mormonism has a similar effect on most other religious movements, including in most cases their own.

So, I don't know who or what God is, or if there is something like what most people have in mind when they think of "God". My beliefs run along the lines of people like Einstein. He believed that there was some kind of organizing force behind the wonderful order that his studies of the physical world disclosed to him, and he had a great reverence for that force, whatever it is. I feel the same way. But, Einstein did not claim to understand what this force was and rejected the testimony of all those who claimed they knew these things. I am content with this kind of belief as far as God is concerned. And if He chooses to make more than that known to me in a fashion that I can communicate on the basis of evidence and reason to others, I will be thrilled. Until then, I will remain unwilling to accept the emotional experiences I have, or other people have, as evidence of physical reality. My experience when relying on emotional experiences of this type is not good. And the history of mankind in this regard is much worse. It is precisely this that caused things like the Crusades, Jonestown and 9/11. I enjoyed Karen Armstrong's "The History of God" and "The Battle for God" on this point.

Who Was Jesus Christ?

I don't know. The Gospels were recorded decades after Jesus died. There is significant doubt as to the accuracy and even legitimacy of many of the other earliest evidences of his ministry. It seems likely that as a cultural hero, the accounts of his life were exaggerated. The pattern of the Gospels themselves suggests this.

Many of the teachings attributed to Jesus enlighten me. Others, now that I have critically considered them, leave me cold. Since I can't be sure what came from him and what did not, I gratefully use what is useful and do not worry about the rest. Most Christians do likewise, but have not examined his teachings or their beliefs carefully enough to realize this.

I consider myself to be a Christian at the liberal end of the spectrum. Bishop John Spong and I would have a lot in common, for example. So while I am now enlightened by many spiritual traditions in addition to what I inherited from my well-intentioned parents and community, the primary prism through which I see life remains Christian.

Joseph Campbell indicates that almost all religious traditions have the means required to enlighten and guide us, as long as we do not literally interpret them. I agree, and find plenty within the Christian tradition to feed my soul. At the same time, I do not feel shy about supplementing my Christian diet with Buddhism, other eastern philosophies, Jewish or Muslim teachings, and perhaps most importantly, what science has to tell us about our physical reality. And when scientific evidence reaches a certain level of credibility, my religious beliefs bow to it. On the other hand, science cannot dictate my "whys". It does not have the tools to do that.

What Have I Lost By Abandoning My Religious Community?

There is no free lunch, as they say. I have lost many things by leaving my religious tradition. But the desire to avoid this kind of loss should not be a reason to remain wherever you happen to have been born. I suspect that few who read this would suggest that a young teenage girl or an already married woman who is being pressured into polygamous marriage by a religious leader on the basis of her community's beliefs should submit to that just because it happens to be what is accepted in her community. Most would want to help such a girl or woman to resist her predatory, but likely well-intentioned, religious leader.

I believe that routines and ritual are important, and can be used to both convey and reinforce healthy values. As noted above, I still consider myself a Christian and have begun to attend services here and there. I enjoy most of what I have experienced, and could see myself fitting in to many different communities that are tolerant of my kind of liberal interpretation of Christianity. I am also comfortable in certain parts of the Jewish movement, and in fact was surprised to find when I took an on-line test a while ago that my beliefs are similar to those of some parts of the "Reform" branch of Judaism. I feel an affinity to the Universalist Unitarians, attended one of their services, and enjoyed it. Taoism also appeals to me, largely because it is so open and has a long, mostly honorable, tradition.

I may at some point find a stream of Christianity or some other religion into which I comfortably fit. I would like to be able to do something that will meet both my wife's, my children's and my needs. We have not found that yet, and have not even yet decided on a search criteria that is likely to produce something to meet our needs. As noted above, there are some limits as to how quickly we can change. For the time being my experience with Mormonism has made me uncomfortable with institutions in general, and I am content to not rush the process of becoming part of a new community, and adopting new traditions.

What Effect Might Publishing My Views Have Within the Mormon Community or on My Mormon Relationships?

Very little. My family and friends already know what I believe. And, the vast majority of the Mormon community will either not read what I write because it is critical of Mormonism, or will be unaffected by it due to the cognitive dissonance it will produce in them. The Jehovah's Witness' have survived many specific, failed prophecies respecting Jesus second coming. By comparison, what I do is nothing. It will not make more than a ripple in the local Mormon pool.

However, there will be a few who whether they know it or not are approaching the fringes of Mormon belief, and will find in what I have written support for concerns that have been bubbling beneath their consciousness. It is healthy, if painful, for people like that to question. So, I am not concerned about them.

Some Mormon leaders are likely to take the position I am doing wrong by exposing faithful Mormons to "meat" when all they can handle is "milk". I deal at some length with this and other similarly disingenuous arguments in an essay titled "Should the Mormon Church Come Clean?" on my website. Suffice it to say that this is a problem created by the Mormon leaders, and one that they are not taking action to solve. They fiddle while Rome burns, so to speak. The more Mormons go on missions, marry in Mormon temples, and otherwise build their lives on false premises the more pain eventually will be suffered when their personal houses of cards come tumbling down, as mine did. The earlier this happens in one's life, the less painful it is. So I do

not apologize for speaking to, and causing pain for, those few Mormons who are capable of hearing me.

In fact, that is what I think the New Testament teaching means that speaks of those who have ears being the ones intended to hear, as does the Buddhist saying that when the student is ready, the teacher appears. This is a common wisdom literature theme.

I note that I sent an early draft of this essay to a number of people who are still active Mormons and whose intellectual points of view I value. One of them is serving as a Mormon Bishop right now. They each had some quibbles, but overall the feedback was positive. The bishop said he would write it 80%+ the way I had.

There is another point worth making with respect to the conflict produced by people who change their beliefs. I am indebted to the philosopher Alan Watts for the following bit of wisdom. In one of his books, he notes that conflict at one level of life often is a requirement for harmony in another. For example, he notes the immense conflict between the various organisms that make up our bloodstream and the rest of our biology. Were it not for this conflict, the harmony that we experience as human individuals would not be possible. A related point, which Watts did not make, is that our extensive use of antibiotics has disrupted some of the conflict within our systems. This disruption has extended to the point at which "superbugs" are developing to level the playing field. The lesson for us is that we need to be careful with respect to how much conflict we eliminate. Complete peace is not the ideal we so often imagine. This paradox is central to our very existence, and one that I am working to understand.

Joseph Campbell said something years ago with regard to conflict respecting religious organizations. He said that heresy is the lifeblood of any institution. This, in his view, is because institutions are incapable on their own of remaining sufficiently in touch with their environment to continue to be functional. They tend to overuse antibiotics, as it were. Heretics within any institutional system are those who criticize the institution, usually because it is becoming out of touch with its environment. Hence, the heretics act as a kind of warning system or steerage that helps to keep the organization on course.

Max Weber referred to this concept with his distinction between "priests" and "prophets". The priests are the organizational leaders who want stability and to remain in control. The prophets are usually heretics who are recognized eventually to have been helpful. They lob information or insight bombs in over the institution's walls, to the chagrin of the priests. This is part of the lower level conflict that produces harmony at higher organizational levels.

So, much of what institutions interpret as heresy are the signals broadcast by the sentient fringes of the institution respecting environmental conditions. While detested by institutional leaders, heresy over the long term guides institutional development. Think Galileo.

There are many examples of the kind of heresy I have in mind within the Mormon Church, Mormon culture and Mormon history. For many years, there were heretical cries within Mormonism respecting the plight of black people. Eventually, those cries were heeded and a "revelation" came that rectified at least part of the racism inherent within Mormon theology. More recently, heretics have focused on the extremely patriarchal nature of Mormonism and have cried out for a greater role for women within the Mormon Church. While many would say that the pendulum in that regard has hardly moved, I suggest that it has moved at least to some extent and believe that it will continue to move. However, this process will be far too slow to satisfy most, and many (such as me) will have long decamped before it will have moved in a

material fashion. The same thing can be said with regard to the concerns quite fairly raised by the gay community with respect to Mormon policies, and the suicide rate in the Mormon gay community for which they must be at least in part responsible..

Some say perspective is everything, and while we recognize hyperbole in that statement, it is hard to overestimate the importance of perspective. We all wish to find peace, and yet many feel ourselves in a position of fundamental conflict with once loving and trusted family and community members. Perhaps one way to find peace within this conflict is to recognize the importance of that conflict in the big picture - it is part of what maintains social balance by connecting reluctant social institutions and the groups they serve to the greater reality. Heretics are, in effect, the nervous systems of organizations of which they are a part.

Another way to find harmony is to follow the Eastern wisdom of simply accepting what cannot be changed, and carefully deciding how to act with regard to the few things over which we have control. Having made my decision to depart my inherited religion and hence create conflict between myself and many others, I can either carry a burden of regret respecting what I have lost and fear with regard to what the future may bring in that regard, or I can simply accept what I cannot change. I have found peace in that concept - simple acceptance.

In summary, it is my view that the continuing insignificant role I play in conflict related to Mormonism from time to time is no more than a microscopic part of the Ying and Yang required for a much greater and more important harmony. If my role is insignificant, why do I bother? As noted above, I try to live the Golden Rule. And, while in the big picture I am nothing, several hundred people during the past few months were sufficiently moved by what I have written that they took the time to express their thanks to me for what I have done. That is more than enough to me. I wish someone had been ahead of me on the path to provide similar perspective.

Have I Lost My "Soul" Because I Choose to Direct Myself Instead of Obeying Those Who Say They Have God's Authority?

Those who have this concern believe they know who has God's authority, and what will happen after death. My experience as a believing Mormon, and study of many religious traditions since leaving Mormonism, leads me to conclude that certainty about such things is not justified. Such certainty is usually due to either emotional experience or the universal human tendency to adopt the dominant group's beliefs, no matter how bizarre they may seem to outsiders. For example, anthropologists tell stories of primitive people who fall over laughing when they hear that their sophisticated Western visitors believe in a god whose human mother was a virgin.

I do not know who has God's authority, but I observe that many claim it and that many people are certain that only their leaders are authorized by God. And I do not know what happens after death. But I observe that many religious leaders indicate that I must obey them and only them, or bad things will happen to me after death. And I finally observe that the less people know about the spiritual experience of other people and how psychology and sociology work, the more likely they are to believe that a particular group of people (and always their group) is favored by God.

The theory makes the most sense out of this evidence is that humans like the idea that God is leading them and so are susceptible to believing the dominant leader in their group who claims to be God's representative. The promise of good things after death for those who obey that leader, and bad things for those who disobey, encourages obedience. The certain belief in a life

after death, and the promise that it will be wonderful (if we obey the leader, of course), helps to help ease the universal fear of death.

So, I have come to trust my own judgment more than that of any religious leader, or those who repeat the words of religious leaders.

I finally note that I recently conducted an informal poll of about 35 pastors in Calgary. One of the questions I asked each of them was what would happen after death to a Buddhist who without ever hearing of Christ lived his life more in accord with Christ's teachings than almost all Christians. Thirty of those pastors told me that the Buddhist would not go to Heaven because he had not been saved by Christ's sacrifice. Five indicated, more or less, that it is following Christ's example that is important and that form of worship and names used are not important. So the Buddhist would be fine, and God would work out the details in a fashion they did not pretend to understand.

I also note that two of the 30 conservative pastors pointed out to me that the Christian churches that are the most vigorous, rapidly growing, etc. are those that preach that a specific kind of belief in Christ, and only Christ, is required for salvation and that this message must be shared. They told me that this belief allows people feel that they have found something special, and motivates them to give generously of their time and money. These churches' success, they suggested, proves their approach to be in accordance with God's will. Since I did not want to be difficult with them, I did not ask why the same phenomenon is well known in the Jewish and Muslim worlds – that is, the most rapidly growing, "successful" groups tend to be missionary minded and dogmatic. The pastors' logic would suggest those Muslim and Jewish groups are "true" as well.

I conclude that people who fear for my soul do so out of an understandable, but nonetheless lamentable, lack of perspective. This is a kind of tribalism that Karen Armstrong in "The Battle For God" indicated is a reaction to the increasing uncertainty of modern life. People want certainty, and so the religions that provide it are attractive. It is my view that this type of certainty is unhealthy for many reasons because it turns people away from the embrace of all humanity that will be required at some not too distant time to sustain life on the only planet within our current reach that can sustain us..

What Advice Does My Experience Offer to Those Who Are Changing Their Own Highly-Structured Belief Systems?

Cognitive dissonance theory is the single most helpful thing I studied while coming to grips with my religious experience. Most of us have a crippling fear of leaving our "herd", whatever it is. There is decades of cognitive dissonance research available on the Internet and at bookstores that explain why this is the case, and why in many cases after doing the appropriate research, we should push through that fear. It prevents us from seeing, and enjoying, many wonderful opportunities for growth.

As a friend put it to me recently, we are afraid to jump off the Mormon cloud because there is nothing but air below us. And when we are finally compelled to jump in spite of our fear, we land on another cloud and find wonderful things there.

I would also say that it is critical to go slow. This is a process that involves each of the stages of grief: denial; anger; bargaining; depression; and finally acceptance. This takes time. It also puts lot of pressure on important relationships. As noted above, different people have varying

abilities to change. However, with enough time and love much more change than appears possible often can be effected.

One of the worst evils of Mormonism and other rigid religions is the manner in which they suppress free speech, and hence learning and growth. I was not even aware of this near all pervasive aspect of Mormonism while I was Mormon. One simply does not express an opinion that conflicts with the orthodox line, as it changes gradually over time. This creates at the subconscious first, and later conscious levels, a cornered rat feeling that is likely in my view part of what is responsible for the North America leading rate of Prozac consumption in Utah, which is 70% Mormon.

For a while, I thought I was losing my mind. I would try to discuss my concerns with intelligent, loving friends or family members only to draw an emotional, angry or hurt response, or a refusal to even consider the evidence respecting things that to me were not only obvious, but of fundamental importance. I now understand that their reactions were not due to a lack of intelligence or compassion, but rather testimony to the strength of cognitive dissonance and the dominance of authority over individuality within Mormonism.

It is important to realize that only a small percentage of those who have been fully conditioned within any rigid religious movement will be capable of fundamental change. And, if you happen to be one of those few who seek change, much of the organization's nature will be designed to isolate you and make that change as difficult as possible. This is because it is in the organization's interest to prevent you from changing, and to prevent you from infecting others with the desire to change. The organization is an organism that has, in a sense, a mind of its own and that acts to protect itself (See David Sloan Wilson, "Darwin's Cathedral").

In the pre-Internet days, it was very difficult for the few who wanted, or needed, to change to find the support necessary to do so. Now, at a few mouse clicks, one can find supportive communities of mostly well educated, witty, enjoyable people who will help. I can't provide links to any sites other than those related to Mormonism, but know they exist because I have received emails from people on their way out of other authoritarian faiths who tell me that the information on my website resonates with them, and that their online experience is similar to mine.

I am only familiar with a small percentage of the many websites relevant to Mormonism. Here are a few that I found helpful:

- Rethinking Mormonism (<http://www.i4m.com/think/>): A site that summarizes the critical information respecting some of the key questions questioning Mormons often wish to address, and a good place to start;
- 20 Truths About Mormonism (<http://www.trialsOfAscension.net/mormon.html>): Similar to Rethinking Mormonism. Another good place to start.
- LDS-Mormon.com (<http://www.lds-mormon.com/>): The single most comprehensive and easily accessible site on the web respecting "real" Mormon history.
- New Order Mormon (<http://www.newordermormon.homestead.com/>): A bulletin board for those who are questioning, but wish to remain faithful.

- The View from the Foyer (<http://www.aimoo.com/forum/freeboard.cfm?id=418550&NoCaches=Yes>): A bulletin board for those who are questioning and for whom remaining faithful is less important, or no longer an issue.
- Recovery from Mormonism (<http://www.exmormon.org/>): Similar to the Foyer, but much larger, somewhat more strident, and it hosts a huge array of topic accessible data related to the kinds of questions that are often asked by those who wish to understand the underpinnings of their Mormon faith.

What Is My Single Biggest "Issue" With the Mormon Church?

The essential issue for me is one of breach of trust. The Mormon belief system uses a host of well known psychological tools to persuade the members to trust the leaders. Here is a quote from another famous practitioner of this art:

With pride we see that one man remains beyond all criticism, that is the Führer. This is because everyone feels and knows: he is always right, and he will always be right. The National Socialism of all of us is anchored in uncritical loyalty, in the surrender to the Führer that does not ask for the why in individual cases, in the silent execution of his orders. We believe that the Führer is obeying a higher call to fashion German history. There can be no criticism of this belief. (Herman Hess Biography, <http://thirdreich.net/Hess-Bio.html>)

Now consider this quote from Sidney Rigdon:

The imperative duty of the Church to obey the word of Joseph Smith, or the presidency, without question or inquiry, and that if there were any that would not, they should have their throats cut from ear [to] ear." (Quinn, Mormon Hierarchy, Origins of Power, p. 94)

This approach has been softened lately. Here is something more recent that I think is fair to call typical. It is from First Presidency member James Faust in 1985:

No stone wall separates the members of the Church from all of the seductions of the world. Members of the Church, like everyone else, are being surfeited with deceptions, challenges, and temptations. However, to those of enduring faith, judgment, and discernment, there is an invisible wall which they choose never to breach. Those on the safe side of this invisible wall are filled with humility, not servitude. They willingly accept the supremacy of God and rely upon the scriptures and counsel of His servants, the leaders of the Church. These leaders of the Church are men with human frailties, and are imperfect in their wisdom and judgment. Perfection in men is not found on the earth. But almost without exception these leaders sincerely, humbly, and prayerfully render great and dedicated Christian service to the best of their ability. More important, they hold a divine warrant and commission through which great and eternal blessings come to those who sustain and follow them. They are God's servants.

I believe that few things in life deserve one's complete confidence. I testify that the Church is worthy of our full trust. There is no inconsistency between truth and faith. I know that everyone who sincerely and righteously seeks to know this can have it spiritually confirmed. May we open up our minds, hearts, and spirits to the divine source of truth. May we reach above ourselves and beyond our mundane concerns and become

heirs to the knowledge of all truth and to the abundant life promised by our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. I pray that this may be so, in His holy name, amen."

Notice how he acknowledges Mormon leadership imperfection, which sounds reasonable, but then assures his listeners that "the Church is worthy of our full trust". I must infer that he also knows that, as Dallin Oaks has said several times at least, the Church is only going to tell one side of the story. And yet full trust is warranted. This can only be because he is certain that the Church has "the truth", and hence a little deception is justified. These are dangerous people to have at the controls of a huge organization like the LDS church.

And even more recently (2001) Thomas Monson said something similar in a talk to the Mormon youth:

Let us remember that the wisdom of God may appear as foolishness to men, but the greatest single lesson we can learn in mortality is that when God speaks and we obey, we will always be right. Some foolish persons turn their backs on the wisdom of God and follow the allurements of fickle fashion, the attraction of false popularity, and the thrill of the moment. Their course of conduct so resembles the disastrous experience of Esau, who exchanged his birthright for a mess of pottage.

And what are the results of such action? I testify to you that turning away from God brings broken covenants, shattered dreams, vanished ambitions, evaporated plans, unfulfilled expectations, crushed hopes, misused drives, warped character, and wrecked lives. ...

Remember that faith and doubt cannot exist in the same mind at the same time, for one will dispel the other. Should doubt knock at your doorway, just say to those sceptical, disturbing, rebellious thoughts: "I propose to stay with my faith, with the faith of my people. I know that happiness and contentment are there, and I forbid you, agnostic, doubting thoughts, to destroy the house of my faith. I acknowledge that I do not understand the process of creation, but I accept the fact of it. I grant that I cannot explain the miracles of the Bible, and I do not attempt to do so, but I accept God's word. I wasn't with Joseph, but I believe him. My faith did not come through science, and I will not permit so-called science to destroy it." (First Presidency Message, "The Lighthouse of the Lord: A Message to the Youth of the Church", Ensign Magazine, February 2001)

The tenor of this kind of counsel is clear - "We are right; we will not lead you astray; if you disobey us you will suffer; so trust us and obey us." I could provide also quotes re the after life consequences of disobedience - loss of family relationships etc.

The effect of being taught the kind of things I have just outlined, while in the middle of a herd that trusts the people leading it, is powerful. The natural human response is to trust as well.

There is one more bit of Mormon leadership chicanery that is worthwhile noting before leaving this point. Recently Russell Nelson, a Mormon Apostle, spoke to a group of religious and government leaders at a conference in Kiev, Ukraine with respect to religious freedom (See <http://www.lds.org/newsroom/voice/display/0,18255,5004-1-121,00.html> for the full text of his speech). The concern of those at this conference was primarily with governments that do not permit the people to choose their own religion. After listening to Nelson, you might well come away with the idea that the Mormon Church is the most open minded, easy going organization around. Here are a few quotes:

"Each religion should be free to propagate itself among present and future generations, so long as it does not use coercive or fraudulent means."

No where in his talk does Nelson specify any other brake on the behaviour of religious organizations. And this is consistent with what I have heard from Mormon leaders on many other occasions.

So, accordingly to Nelson, the Mormon Church should be allowed to sell any way it wants as long as it does cross the lines drawn by fraud and coercion. This is more or less the situation under which it operates in Canada and the US. But, in North America we have much more strict rules that govern the sale of things like financial securities (stocks, bonds, insurance products, etc.), multi-level marketing programs, and even door to door and used car sales because fraud and coercion are not adequate to deal with salesmanship of many types. In many jurisdictions, for example, testimonials cannot be used in the sale of financial products because of their well-known mind clouding effect.

In short, there are all kinds of unethical things that can be done that fall short of what is required for fraud or coercion. See "Should the Mormon Church Come Clean?" at <http://mccue.cc/bob/long.htm> for some examples in this regard.

Note the words and concepts that Nelson did not mention in his speech. He says nothing about "full, plain and true" disclosure, and nothing about doing all reasonably possible to ensure that converts are make a fully informed decision. Nelson appears not to want to raise the bar in that regard.

My advice to any jurisdiction that does not already permit Mormon proselyting is that it should not be allowed unless some kind of full, plain the true disclose rules are first adopted. The ability to sell religion to a group of people should be regarded as a privilege, much as selling securities is. Religions that are not prepared to meet the full, plain and true disclosure requirements, hence, should be prevented from selling. I don't see this as a conflict with the constitutional right of religious freedom that we have in the US and Canada. In fact, this kind of law would enhance religious freedom by reducing the amount of deception that is used to cause what feels like a religious experience but in fact is an means by some to control others on false pretences. That is one of the main reasons that the tough disclosure laws related to securities were adopted. The functioning of capital markets is important to our society. Those playing at the fringes of the financial markets were threatening their operation. I would say the same respecting religion.

Imagine what the Joseph Smith story would sound like if it was required to be told in accordance with a "full, plain and true" disclosure rule? I envision a lot of missionary "discussions" (meetings between Mormon missionaries and people who are investigating the Mormon Church) that would go something like this:

Missionary: Joseph Smith tells us that he had a vision in which God delivered some very important information to him. But, we are not exactly sure what happened during that vision. First, Joseph said he saw a toad that turned into an angel and then delivered the message; then he said he saw just an angel; then he said he saw Christ; then he said he saw Christ and Heavenly Father. Those are the most reliable accounts we have, but there are a few others ...

Investigator: Hold on. Did you say that there one, or several, of these visions?

Missionary: Just one. The Prophet said all of these things about the same vision. We think that the last account he gave is the one he really meant, but we can't be sure. Oh, I almost forgot to mention something we are required by law to say. None of the newspapers or surviving journals or other sources of information in Joseph's area around the relevant time record any mention of Joseph's vision, even though he said it caused quite a stir, and many similar visions that other people had were recorded in these sources. And, there is no record of his having mentioned this vision for the first time until many years after it happened.

Investigator: Hmmmm.

Missionary: And here is something else we are required by law to tell you. Joseph Smith introduced God's law of polygamy to the world. He married more than 30 women. But some of the marriage ceremonies appear either not to have happened or to have followed consummation of the marriage by some time. A few of Joseph's wives were quite young – as young as 14 or 15. And many of them were married to other men at the same as Joseph. The Prophet in some cases sent men off on missions for the Mormon Church and while they were gone, told their wives that God ordered that they were to be married to him as well as to their other husbands, and that they had to keep this as a secret. And then, Joseph said that because the people were not ready to hear this kind of hard to understand truth, God told him to lie for over ten years about his sexual activities. So countless times in private, public, over the pulpit at church, and in various forms of news media he assured people that polygamy was not part of Mormonism and that he was not having sexual relations with anyone other than his only legal wife. All the while, he was having sexual relations with many women and was teaching some of his close associates that this is what God wanted them to also do, and so they too were talking secret plural wives. We believe that God ordered Joseph to proceed in this fashion.

Investigator (sitting slack jawed): I can't believe what I just heard. Why would I believe anything a man like this told me? I don't think we want to hear any more about your church. You are very nice young people, and I can tell how sincere you are. But what you have is definitely not something we want.

And lets not kid ourselves about the financial implications of religion. It is a huge business. The Mormon Church would be a member of the Fortune 500 were it a business corporation. Other religions have huge revenues and asset bases as well. It makes no sense to me that religious institutions not be subjected to information disclosure requirements in light of the financial and time requirements they are in a position to impose on their members. The decision as to where and how to worship is much more important than the decision to purchase a stock for as little as a few hundred dollars.

So, Nelson leaves the Mormon Church free to do anything short of fraud and coercion, and suggests that government intervention that restricts proselyting on any other basis is wrong. This leaves the masses at the mercy of the Mormon and other religions emotionally oriented marketing machines. These present Mormon marriages and families, for example, as being more happy than the norm. Relevant to that image is the fact that Utah (which is 70% Mormon) either leads or is close to the top of the US charts on a per capita basis in terms of anti-

depressant use, multilevel marketing participation, personal bankruptcies, rape and spousal abuse claims. That sounds happy, doesn't it?

We don't let stock promoters, used car salesmen, or even the Avon Lady, operate at the Mormon Church's low ethical level. Why on earth does it make sense to turn religions loose in that regard?

So, in summary, it is my view that the same rules that apply to securities salesmanship should also apply to religions.

Here is another quote from Nelson:

How can we have freedom of religion if we are not free to compare honestly, to choose wisely, ..."

Note that the focus here is on the individual, not the religious institution. How "free" is the member to look at different sources? According to Nelson, as long as the member is not subject to fraud or coercion, he is free. That is the implication of his earlier statements. But, as I have pointed out above and explain in some detail in an essay titled "Religious Faith: Enlightening or Blinding?" at <http://mccue.cc/bob/long.htm>, our decisions can be manipulated by belief systems without crossing those lines. What Nelson is really saying is that he does not want governments to prevent the Mormon Church from using its present sales techniques while selling its religious goods.

Nelson also said:

While searching for the truth, we must be free to change our mind—even to change our religion—in response to new information and inspiration.

Again, this comment is aimed at governments who currently will not allow their people change belief and so become Mormon. He would also of course say that every Mormon is "free" to change his or her belief. But, the psychological ties the Church uses to bind its membership to it are powerful. The "Religious Faith ..." essay referenced above explores that, and I try to illustrate another aspect of how this works in a short story titled "The Blessing Chair" that can be found at <http://mccue.cc/bob/creative.htm>. A full, plain and true disclosure rule would go a long way to breaking the crippling nature of the dependence that Mormonism causes its members to develop.

Nelson demonstrates the kind of careful double speak of which I am highly critical. I do not believe that what the Mormon Church does in this regard is ethically justifiable. In fact, I believe it to be dangerous and wish I had the means to put a stop to it.

Then we come to "faithful history". The Mormon leaders would acknowledge its existence in some of the most carefully worded ways you can imagine. Do they admit to lying? Of course not. Dallin Oaks has clearly stated that lying is unacceptable and that he does not understand why Joseph Smith said some of the things he did, including his statements to the effect that he lied about polygamy etc. because god told him to. And yet in a church educators seminar Oaks is on record as saying that the Church is obliged to only tell "one side of the story", and so justifies things like the missionary discussions and their misleading account of the First Vision, the Martyrdom of Joseph Smith etc. It seems to me that Oaks et al are misleading in precisely the same way Smith was, but are doing so by the careful elimination of critical facts instead of

by direct deception as Smith did. Gordon Hinckley has given numerous talks in which he has mentioned how wrong it is to besmirch the names of great men by insisting on bringing up a few flaws in their characters. In short, Mormon leaders will look you in the eye and say that they are not suppressing anything that is important to the "real" story. They believe that Smith was God's prophet, and hence it is not important that the people know about the many times he lied, his sexual activities with married women and young girls, etc. These are minor details. Anything that might indicate that Smith was not God's prophet is an inconsequential detail. This is classical cognitive dissonance induced denial.

I am in full agreement with what Albert Einstein once said:

The search for truth implies a duty. One must not conceal any part of what one has recognized to be true.

Compare that approach to "faithful history". The leaders of the Mormon Church pay a lot of lip service to the importance of the pursuit of truth. I commend Einstein's statement to them.

The psychologists tell us that humans seem to have a powerful aversion to those who deceive them. In fact, many experiments have confirmed that once a deception has been discovered, most humans will wish to punish the deceiver, and that cost benefit considerations do not enter into the equation in a rational manner. They theorize that trust is so essential to the functioning of human groups that what seems like an irrational overreaction to a breach of trust is programmed into us by evolution in much the same fashion as are many altruistic behaviours. It is essential to the long term well being of the human groups to which we belong that the deceivers be identified, and so individuals will make significant sacrifices to that end. This is consistent with Watts' insight about conflict at lower organizational levels being essential to higher level harmony.

The above information has helped me to understand the depth of my feelings of disgust with respect to the leaders of the Mormon Church who are responsible for the deception I have just outlined.

Is the "Faithful History" Policy Something that Mormons are Formally Taught?

It is taught in the sense that members are taught how dangerous it is to read "questioning" materials. But mostly, members are kept so busy with "Mormon" reading that they do not have a chance to read anything else. And the Mormon reading is supposed to "come first". During the last decade much more control has been exerted over materials used to prepare lessons, home and visiting teaching messages etc. The Church discourages members from using material outside lesson manuals, for example. All the work is done by the Church in terms of information collection, to minimize the need for members to go on-line, for example, to get information. This is justified as a "back to the basics" approach. Go to the pure source - the scriptures - and almost nothing else. But it is hard to understand the scriptures (I would say impossible) without social and historical context. That is the nature of all literature - it is time bound to a large extent.

Does the Mormon Church Hurt Its Members or Pose a Risk to the Public?

The offence to the individual is in the purposeful creation of a relationship of trust, and then its abuse. In particular, we are encouraged to trust LDS leaders to act in our best interests, and instead they act in the best interests of the institution and often against our best interest.

Think of gay people for example. If LDS leaders acknowledged the legitimacy of the biological information that is coming out respecting homosexuality, and only the uncertainty it creates respecting the words of the prophets (they don't need to say science is right; just that the matter is uncertain), gay Mormon suicide rates are likely to go down. The Mormon leaders, hence, could do something that would likely save human lives, and would certainly enrich them. But, that would weaken the leaders' authority. The latter reality prevents them from assessing the biological information properly in my view, and so prevents them from acknowledging its legitimacy. Hence, the suicides continue apace. This is a direct result of the leaders having engendered such a high level of trust, and then acted to protect their organizational mandate and the integrity of the organization against the interest of many individual, trusting, members of the organization. This is played out in multiple ways within Mormon culture - the ox of particular groups of trusting individual Mormons (gays; women; intellectuals; etc.) is gored by the very Mormon leaders who have engendered that trust. And this is not a Mormon thing; it is a human thing. However, in most walks of human life, when a relationship of trust has been purposefully created (or even assented to), serious legal responsibility follows. I still believe that at some point this will become a point of legal liability for the Mormon Church.

The Mormon Church positions itself as an intermediary between the individual and his or her most intimate relationship partners (marriage; children; close friends). So a good marriage is not quite equated with one in which both partners obey Church authority, but such obedience is seen by most Mormons as essential to a good marriage (See "The Effect of Mormon Temple Ritual" at <http://mccue.cc/bob/long.htm> and "The Blessing Chair" at <http://mccue.cc/bob/creative.htm>). Good parent-child relations are also conditioned on obedience to Church authority. This does several bad things.

First, it obscures what needs to be done for healthy relationships to be maintained. And second, it creates a dependence that makes it hard to function without the Church as a kind of crutch to lean on.

The Church also positions itself to take credit for the good things we do and the good in who we are. I am a good father BECAUSE I magnify the priesthood. I am a good person BECAUSE I live the gospel. If I did not have the Church, I would not be those good things. The feeling engendered is, again, that of dependence on the Church. And we are taught that we should be "humble" which means giving God, of the Church, or others credit for the good things we do and are. I have heard countless people say while bearing testimony to the truthfulness of the Mormon Church that they would be nothing without the Church. They can't look themselves in the mirror and take credit for the wonderful things they do and are. From a sociological point of view, it is clear what is going on. The Church is creating a culture that binds its members to it so that they cannot leave. It reminds me of the line from The Eagles' song "Hotel California" - "You can check out, but you can never leave." One of the ways to understand that famous line is as a reference to drug dependency.

Group level evolutionary theory explains this in terms of the group taking action to strengthen itself, at the expense of the well-being of individual members. This would be done at the subconscious level by both leaders and members. A couple of recent books explore this topic. David Sloan Wilson's "Darwin's Cathedral" and Steven Johnson's "Emergence". Pierre Bourdieu has written extensively about this from a sociological point of view. See David Swartz, "Culture and Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu".

The cumulative effect of what the Mormon Church does, as I have just indicated, is crippling to the individual. It retards individuation. And most ironically, this crippling, retarding process affects those who are most faithful in the most negative way. I have many friends who are social Mormons (that is, attend but are not fully committed), and have suffered much less damage than I have for precisely that reason - they never took it seriously, but rather just go along with the social flow and do their own thing. But if you really believe, and really try to do what "the Lord" wants, you don't individuate as you should and hence are less likely to develop the skills you need to walk away from the Mormon Church and feel good about yourself as you function in society.

The Church, in this sense, is like a narcotic or other addictive substance that feels good while creating an unhealthy dependency - gutting those who do it. I recall the Eagles once again.

Another public policy point relates to how humans develop a world view. We only have only so many arrows in our quiver in that regard. It is a little like language development, or learning music. What we do while we are young sets patterns that are virtually impossible to change in fundamental ways when we are older. By inculcating a trusting, authority dependant world view, Mormonism weakens its faithful and the very fabric of society. This is my explanation for at least part of a variety of disturbing statistics that come from Utah, which is 70% Mormon. As noted above, on a per capita basis, Utah either leads or is close to leading the US in its use of anti depressants, personal bankruptcies, white collar crime, multi level marketing organization participation rates, spousal abuse, and rape. It is reasonable to believe that these things are all products of a culture that uses dogmatic patriarchal authority as its ultimate arbiter of truth, and teaches that the experience of emotion that can be manipulated by that same authority is proof of the authority's legitimacy – classic self-confirming, circular reasoning. That is why polygamy still flourishes in Utah - the leaders of polygamist communities use the same epistemic (method of knowing) process that Mormons accept to establish and maintain authority.

In a Nutshell - "Sound Bites" That Describe My Most Fundamental Problems with Mormonism

Here are a few.

- Mormonism inculcates a complete trust of Mormon leaders. The discovery that such trust has been breached mortally wounds Mormon faith.
- Mormonism's highest leaders abuse the trust of innocent followers. In most walks of life, this would create legal liability.
- Mormonism's highest leaders promised that if I trusted them, they would look after my interests. They looked after their own instead.
- The greater the trust, the deeper the wound its breach will cause. The breach of complete trust mortally wounds faith.
- Mormonism's highest leaders demand, receive, and violate, the almost complete trust of faithful Mormons.
- Mormon leaders promise put their followers' interests first, but instead often protect the Mormon Church and so harm those who have trusted them.

I have to confess that none of these quite "rings the bell" from my point of view.