

*Is it possible for a couple's relationship to grow and deepen
even while the faith of one or both partners change?*

FOR BETTER, FOR WORSE, FOR APOSTASY?

HOW FAITH ISSUES AFFECT COUPLE RELATIONSHIPS

*By Ronda and Mike Callister, Page and Tom Kimball,
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EDITOR'S NOTE: The reflections here are excerpted from a panel discussion with the same name held 11 August at the 2006 Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium. It has far and away been the most frequently ordered and downloaded recording from that symposium (tape/CD/download SL06273).





Introduction

by Ronda Callister

THE GENESIS OF THESE REFLECTIONS OCCURRED at the 2005 Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium when I met Page Kimball. As we talked, introduced our husbands, and shared our stories, Page said there ought to be a Sunstone session on marriage and faith. When I responded, “OK, let’s do one with our husbands next year,” she gasped, turned a little white, and said, “But I have never even asked a question at Sunstone before!” But she has been a good sport and gone along with our idea.

At that 2005 symposium, during the audience questions and comments portion of the session “When Beliefs Lead to Estrangement” (CD, tape, download SL05373), a commenter stated that he was a facilitator of a group of post- or ex-Mormons and that within his group, when a change in religious opinion occurs, it can cause a lot of fear within the faithful spouse—often to the point where people cannot listen to each other. The person whose spouse has changed will freeze and back out of the room or accuse that person of being under the influence of Satan. The commenter asked the panel members if they had any suggestions for reducing the fear and tension and enhancing communication.

Panelist Marybeth Raynes responded (paraphrased): “This is a big one, and not just because there might be fear that someone won’t be with you in the next life. . . . Your basic attachment to the person you love and plan to spend the rest of your life and forever with is now threatened. . . . This news can create a feeling of pulling out someone’s basic cord for breath. It hits people at that depth. . . . And when we are hit that strongly in our emotional system, we don’t have words; regular cognitive reasoning doesn’t function. As a result, most of us will regress, we will start using our most primitive, least effective, and therefore least loving interventions.”

We each are couples who have married in the temple. Mike, Tom, John, and Ruth each served LDS missions. In many ways, we have been typical LDS families. But in this panel, we will discuss the challenges of faith changes that have occurred in one or both partners—and the challenges these create for our marital relationships. We are not experts. We simply hope to let others who are experiencing something like this know that they are not alone. We share stories of some of our most difficult periods with the hope that something we share may be helpful.

Ronda’s Story

MY SPIRITUAL CRISIS occurred in 1980 after I had finished my master’s degree and was expecting my second child. Growing up in southern California, I had been obedient and had done all of the right things: Young Women’s awards, Seminary, BYU graduation, and temple marriage. As I finished my schooling, I found myself struggling with the question of how to be a mother of young children while also being able to feel some sense of personal growth and progress when my talents and abilities were not necessarily home-centered. I decided to seek guidance for me as a young mother by reading the scriptures. Instead I became overwhelmed by the maleness I found there. I began asking, “Why don’t we know more about Heavenly Mother?” I thought knowing more about her would give me a sense of where women fit in the eternities. My deeper unspoken question was really: How can I, as a woman, feel a sense of being valued both within the Church and by God?

It was difficult for me to find people to talk to who understood my questions. I did not find answers, and my search soon petered out in frustration and fear. My crisis came not long after Sonia Johnson’s excommunication, and LDS women seemed cautious about discussing these questions. I gradually put mine on the shelf, resigning myself to thinking about them at some future point when I might find additional information to help me.

IN 1987, AFTER Mike and I had been married for eleven years and had four daughters ages newborn to nine, Mike decided he wanted to follow his dream and go to medical school. This was the beginning of a ten-year odyssey—the beginning of which had a wrenching effect on our marriage. We both were working harder than ever before. We both felt our efforts at home were inadequately acknowledged and too little recognized. Mike interpreted my unhappiness as resenting medical school, and I interpreted his unhappiness as criticism and dissatisfaction with me and my efforts.

As our marriage deteriorated, I felt guilty, depressed, and like a failure in the sense that I could not do enough. With the help of a counselor who recommended good books, I was able to learn a lot about myself and recover from my depression. As I felt better about myself, our marriage also improved.

At this same time, I attended a “Pillars of My Faith” session at a Sunstone symposium which became a pivotal moment in my spiritual journey.¹ Listening to Kathleen Flake tell her story helped me realize others had similar questions and inspired me to reopen mine. Now that I was feeling good about myself and my marriage, I decided it was probably time to try to answer my spiritual questions so I would be better prepared to assist my daughters as they grew up and encountered their own questions. I began again to look for answers that had eluded me earlier.

I read all of the feminist theology I could find in Salt Lake City during the pre-Internet, pre-Amazon.com era, using the

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bibliography of Carol Lynn Pearson's *Mother Wove the Morning* as a starting point. I tried talking to Mike about my search and evolving thoughts, but as I did so, I could see the fear in his eyes, so I mostly stopped talking and took a journey that was largely independent of him. After a year or so of reading, thinking, and discussing with others, I realized that I needed to decide what I thought for myself. LDS theology did not answer all of my questions. As I tried to find my sense of worth in God's eyes and in the eyes of the Church, I realized that I could not just keep waiting for the institution to address my longing. I eventually came to some conclusions about what I thought for myself. My search process drew to a close as I began to feel a sense of peace.

During the course of my search, I discovered that the original structure of my faith had crumbled into pieces. I no longer knew exactly what I believed. I was unsettled but kept plodding forward, re-examining each component of my faith, and slowly reassembling the pieces. After a year of reading, thinking, and writing in my journal, I was relieved to find most of my faith was still there. Even as I put my belief system back together in a new way, my outward behavior remained the same; I stayed active in the Church—I just thought a bit differently. Building on the work of James Fowler, in conversation with me, Tom Kimball named this transition as moving from “we believe” to “I believe.” When I did this, I found a new place of equilibrium.

About the time that I was achieving greater peace in my spiritual journey, Mike finished medical school and started a six-year surgery residency at the University of Missouri. I was on a high, excited about all that I had learned over the previous few years, and wanting to maintain the invigorating sense of growth and learning I had been experiencing in my studies. So I did a crazy thing: I started a Ph.D. program. In addition to raising our four daughters, I spent the next five-and-a-half years getting my doctorate, and then six more getting tenure at Utah State University.

These were intense years in which I essentially put my spiritual journey on hold while I focused on my family and my

intellectual journey. I had reached a place of relative peace. Spiritually, I felt comfortable. Then Mike entered his period of doubt and questioning.

Mike's Story

I AM A life-long Mormon, and my ancestors were converts in the early days of the Church. I was born in southern California, and my family settled in Reno, Nevada, where I lived my entire young life. Although I remain active in the Mormon tradition, my personal doctrine is not traditional.

My life as a Mormon boy was reasonably normal. The trouble I managed to find was not particularly insidious. I attended Sunday church meetings and had dedicated youth leaders and teachers. I did not attend Seminary until my senior year in high school. I don't recall doubting any LDS teaching; the Church was always there, but not personally venerated. My parents were consistently loving, accepting, and generous in giving me the elbow room I needed to sort out my faith. I cannot recall a single discussion about missionary service prior to high school graduation. Although I initially had no intention of going on a mission, I fell into the BYU freshman tide moving in that direction, and in 1972, bound for Brazil, I entered the LTM (Language Training Mission) knowing very little about our church and without an energetic testimony.

The LTM was the single most spiritual experience of my young life. The gods smiled upon me as our visas to Brazil were delayed a total of five months—all of which I spent at





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Those who know me now and have heard my current religious ranting and raving wonder why it took almost thirty years to painfully loosen my moorings from conventional faith (Fowler's Stage Three). It probably started early with my contemplation that at least part of our canon was very likely mythological. The creation stories, Adam and Eve, Noah and the flood, and so forth, never fit the observable universe with which I was acquainted. That the Old Testament could be read and understood in a non-literal, non-factual way was certainly never presented to me as an option

Allen Hall in Provo, Utah. While many of my fellow missionaries, who had faithfully attended four years of Seminary, cursed the delay, I felt blessed every minute I was there. Because I was seriously deficient in basic gospel knowledge, I read everything I could get my hands on.

A short example of my ignorance of even the basics: one afternoon while studying, I turned to the elder beside me and exclaimed, "Hey, did you know it was John the Baptist who actually came down as a resurrected being and conferred the Aaronic Priesthood on Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery? Isn't that cool?" He looked at me as if I'd just stepped off the mother ship. Anyway, the Restoration story made sense to me, Jesus communicated with me during one memorable night, and I hit the Brazilian ground running, never looking back until I got home.

In 1976, twenty months after returning from Brazil, I married Ronda in the Los Angeles Temple. We finished our undergraduate studies at BYU and moved to the Salt Lake Valley. After several years in a small business, the births of four daughters, a mortgage, and an M.B.A. for Ronda, I started medical school at the University of Utah at age thirty-three. Following graduation, it was off to Missouri for six years of residency and a Ph.D. for Ronda. Yes, we were absolutely crazy, and if I could, I would excise the years 1987 to 1997 from our marriage. It was very tough. And although Ronda and I both really enjoy our careers, love our children and each other more than ever, and our children seem to have survived our training virtually unscathed, I cannot recommend the path we took to anyone. I am not embarrassed to say that we wore out four sets of marriage counselors—and we needed them all. Currently, Ronda is an organizational behavior professor at Utah State University, and I am a urologist in private practice in Logan.

in any official LDS teaching, and hence I never really entertained doing so. The Book of Mormon, on the other hand, was rock solid—I had no doubts. Then in 1978, I read Donna Hill's book, *Joseph Smith: The First Mormon*, and for the first time, the neat, tidy, and official story I'd taught in Brazil was puzzlingly negotiable. We even attended a few Sunstone symposiums in those days. (Ronda was beginning her religious journey with the Mother in Heaven issues.) Still, with my reasonably regular reading, the Book of Mormon was literally the keystone of my religion, and as long as it was true, I felt well within the safety net of the Restored gospel. We were active, served in many ward callings, tithed, went to the temple, had occasional Family Home Evenings, prayed, and read scriptures daily.

SO WHAT HAPPENED? First: friends—some of whom I'd known for decades—started leaving the Church. I was at a loss. Why would anyone leave the Church? Initially saddened, I ultimately became interested in why someone would leave something within which I felt so safe. This became a time of intensely personal reflection on many doctrinal issues I had suppressed over the years. Because I was convinced that a religious tradition worth one's devotion would stand the test of scrutiny, I decided to step out of the paradigm myself and look as an outsider might at the tradition I'd been practicing. By necessity, my view would be my own, and I did not want to involve Ronda in this potential turmoil—at least not yet.

Second: the issue that troubled me the most was the destiny of the innumerable souls who would never prove themselves within a Christian or LDS milieu. The Doctrine and Covenants sections regarding these issues did not begin to account for the wide spectrum of belief systems and convictions among hu-

mankind. Was I conceited enough to believe that every devout non-Christian or non-Mormon who had spent his or her entire life developing virtue and faith would learn after death that their effort was false, or at least critically inadequate?

Third: I took President Hinckley's challenge, and in 2005, the fifth year of my bishopric service, and along with ward members in Logan, I slowly and methodically reread the Book of Mormon. A few of the stories still moved me, but many did not. *Could any man have written this book?* For the first time in my life, my answer was "perhaps." There were many other developments, books read, and not a few sleepless nights. I ultimately shared with Ronda my developing rejection of various doctrines within our Mormon tradition.

RONDA: Mike waited a number of months before disclosing his doubts. I knew something was wrong. He was withdrawn, down, and had a somewhat shorter fuse than normal. This went on for so long that I began to wonder if our marriage was in trouble and he just didn't want to tell me. By the time he started talking, I was significantly more anxious and fearful than I might have been had he started talking months earlier.

Initially Mike's disclosure was not too upsetting. I had been through my own period of questioning and felt I could understand. I had remained faithful, and I thought Mike might do the same. I also saw that Mike had very few people he could talk to about this. I knew how valuable it had been for me to eventually find a non-judgmental friend who listened to me as I bounced ideas around and explored sometimes unorthodox thoughts. I wanted to be that person for Mike. This became a far more painful and difficult process for me than I expected once I recognized the depth of his questions and doubts. His questions triggered deep fear in me.

Mike asked me on several occasions, "Are you afraid for my salvation?" I kept answering no. He was a wonderful man, and he wasn't sinning. I was afraid on a much more self-centered level. I worried about what would happen to *us*—our marriage and our future together. My dreams of sharing both our lives and our beliefs together felt threatened. Our paths appeared to be diverging.

MIKE: One night, I disclosed to Ronda my doubts about the exclusivity of LDS temple marriage. Even though my focus was on a very positive description of her sibling's non-LDS marriage in which I asked how God could reject their commitment and marriage while accepting ours, Ronda heard my question as a tacit rejection of our marital vows. Although she'd heard me rant and rave about various gospel subjects in the past and had been a marvelous listener and sounding board, this one struck precariously close to heart and home.

RONDA: This was one of the most painful moments for me. When he asked how I could possibly believe in temple sealings, I felt as though he were questioning *our* marriage—especially the eternal part. It seemed at that moment as if he were talking about divorcing half of me—the eternal half. To his credit, the next day, he explained that he was trying to speak

generically about his questions and not trying to challenge me, and that he was not referring to our marriage specifically.

This episode illustrates for me how sensitive these discussions can be, and how carefully we must choose our words. Our conversations continued to trigger fear. It was a very difficult time. But I kept trying to listen and encouraging him to talk. There were long periods of time when Mike was suffering through his own pain, and as he searched for answers, he had little energy left to provide me much reassurance about our relationship.

MIKE: Although I thought the LDS temple was the right place for Ronda and me to be married, I did not consider my feelings for her dependent upon LDS temple doctrine. I wanted to be married to Ronda simply because I love her and want to be with her—not because of the temple. I really like the idea of marital covenants, and I think the temple is a great place for the living to make covenants—but so are chapels, synagogues, cathedrals, mosques, and maybe even a forest or a backyard. Although this view has matured over the years, and at various times, I have been more or less temple active, I do not consider the temple ceremonies *per se* as pivotal to my marriage or my salvation.

RONDA: I spent months alternating between being hopeful and being afraid. Finally I began to realize that neither hope nor fear were useful in this case. As long as I hoped that Mike would either believe or behave a certain way, then I was crushed with disappointment each time he said or did something that even suggested he might be changing and becoming different than I wanted him to be. That fear crowded out my ability to love deeply.

As I thought about what might help Mike, I listened to a Sunstone symposium session on James A. Fowler's *Stages of Faith*. Listening to this and other sessions reawakened my own spiritual journey in a very positive way. The session started me on my own odyssey of reading Fowler. Several books later, what I took away from Fowler's work was invaluable to me in overcoming my fears about Mike's doubts and questions.

Fowler's work suggests that going through a stage of doubt and questioning—even a prolonged period—was a normal developmental stage, and that there was hope for a better future in subsequent stages where even greater spirituality was possible. I drew great comfort from this. I began letting go of my fear and started becoming more accepting of Mike's doubts. When I began to see his journey as normal and one that could potentially lead to a more solid, more hopeful place, we both had a much better experience. I was gradually able to allow him to follow his own faith journey. I came to realize it was best just to offer my love and support.

MIKE: No question Fowler had a very positive effect on Ronda's interpretation of what I was experiencing, and his work gave me some essential map coordinates as well. I agree that Fowler's stages are most useful, and perhaps *only* useful, for those leaving Stage Three ("Synthetic-conventional" faith)

and entering State Four (“Individuative-reflexive” faith). That someone (and not a Mormon) had studied this process, and described a passageway out of the pit I was in, was comforting. Although the faith transition process was perhaps the most painful thing I’d ever done, instead of leaving the Church (which many understandably have) I decided to be patient, stay the course, and trust that there was indeed something healthier beyond the bounds of where I was.

Also, I better understand Ronda’s fear and grief. Just as Marybeth Raynes said in the panel discussion Ronda quoted from in the introduction, these issues hit us at the core—like breathing! I wanted to communicate the deep love I have for Ronda, but after nearly thirty years of marriage, telling your wife that you have serious reservations about the eternal temple ritual is a big potential landmine!

Regardless, this journey has been very beneficial to me. Having a deeper understanding of other belief systems has given me the comfort to select what I believe is important and valid Mormon doctrine and to jettison the rest. When President Hinckley stated to the religious world that perhaps Mormonism could add a little something to their faith, I believe he was describing one lane of the thoroughfare. There is plenty out there in other religious traditions that I can comfortably and fearlessly add to my own personal cosmology that enhances my relationship with Ronda and the Infinite. Ultimately, Ronda became aware that even though my beliefs were undergoing some serious realignment, my commitment to her was not. In the beginning, I did an inadequate job of communicating that to her. I think she understands it better now. The key issue to me is that we are both traveling on this journey, and it is much more satisfying.

RONDA: I think we now both agree that Mike’s journey so far has been a positive experience for our relationship. For a number of years, we hadn’t talked a lot about our beliefs. As long as we thought we believed the same thing, discussion was limited. But after Mike shared his concerns with me, we’ve had many long talks about what and why we believe the things we do. I thrive on talking about important ideas. Once I was able to get past my fears, this deep disclosure has helped us experience times of great closeness and bonding.

These conversations have rejuvenated my own spiritual journey. Now instead of worrying about whether we are on divergent paths, I recognize we are both journeying and can share our experiences with each other. Ours are different journeys, but sharing rather than suppressing them has drawn us closer.

Tom’s Story

IN THE ORTHODOX Mormon narrative, Adam and Eve are placed in the Garden of Eden and then presented with a Catch 22. God commanded them to multiply and replenish the earth yet not partake of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. The problem was—they could not do both. Adam was a bulldog of faithfulness and obedi-

ence to God. But in the Garden, that was getting him nowhere. The real hero is Eve. She chose knowledge, and Adam was forced to make a choice. And here we are.

Page and I have been married for almost seventeen years. We met in Virginia while I was interviewing for a federal job. Page was a nanny for a Catholic family in Vienna, Virginia. I had been home from my mission to Alabama for less than a year and had recently moved to the Washington D.C. area. At church, I bumped into an acquaintance from my Utah hometown. She sensed that I didn’t know very many people and insisted on sending someone to pick me up at my apartment so I could hang out with her and her friends for videos and popcorn. Page was that chauffeur.

I was a “dyed in the wool” zealot Mormon from a conservative Utah LDS family. Page was from Sanpete County, Utah, and was raised with conservative, small-town traditions. Her family has a wonderfully interesting mix of liberal and fundamentalist Mormon leanings.

Page’s father, Jim, liked me when we first became acquainted. Even then, I was steeped in Mormon books and minutiae; Jim was more than capable of keeping up in our conversations. As our friendship grew, I found that I could speak to my father-in-law about many topics that I wasn’t able to engage my own father on. I feel a sense of loss now that things have changed and my father-in-law and I don’t seem capable of having a civil religious conversation. I understand that early in his marriage, he felt judged by some of his extended family for his beliefs. Now I feel judged by him. But it is really mostly my own fault. I’m moving toward agnosticism while Jim is moving in the opposite direction.

I’ve worked in the Mormon book trade for more than a decade. I feel that it’s natural for someone in my trade to encounter moments of cognitive dissonance. And if these moments are allowed to work their course, I feel that they lead to glimpses of honest clarity. I do not mean to say that these glimpses are moments of “Capital T” Truth but rather are instances when one realizes that something isn’t the same anymore and never will be again. The God of my Mormonism died during one of those moments. And if and when I ever find God again, it will simply be something else.

My poor wife. She bargained for a hard-working, clean-cut, Eagle Scout, returned missionary with a quality Mormon pedigree. Instead she got me. By the late 1990’s, I was essentially embarrassed by my Mormonism. I wasn’t happy attending church. In fact, I was really quite angry, feeling that I had been betrayed by my tradition. Page seemed very frustrated with my doubts, and I felt that my church service had become a duty I performed for her sake rather than for myself. While I worked at Benchmark Books, a co-worker, Dan Wotherspoon, introduced me to the work of Emory University Professor James Fowler and his theories about faith stages. I’ve spoken at past symposiums about my experiences with stage theory, but in brief, Fowler’s work and my other reading in the field has allowed me, in time, to make peace with my Mormonism.

Though I find it difficult to quantify my experience in words, I have recently found my ward, and more specifically

my elders quorum, to be a sanctuary for my re-emerging spirituality. Page offered me some advice once. She mentioned that church is where people go to get spiritually recharged, and it isn't my place to detract from that. I've strived, though sometimes unsuccessfully, to contribute positively at church, and to my surprise, I've found my fellow quorum members have been kind and responsive. I've picked my moments to be sure, but I've been honest and respectful in expressing my serious doubts about the gospel. I've also tried not to vent at people who are passing folklore as history, or at those who most likely don't have the tools yet to deal with the serious credibility

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problems facing Mormonism. But for me to walk away from my tradition at this moment would be spitting in the face of good men who have gone out of their way to make me feel comfortable and welcome at church despite my doubts.

The most difficult aspect of a couple's dealing with doubt in marriage is that often spouses go through it at different times.² In our case, I wanted to vent my frustrations about our tradition with my closest friend—Page. But that only contributed stress to a marriage already strained by normal issues of parenting, finances, and such. And that's not to mention my own poor communication skills and, of course, the Kimball temper.

As I've watched my friends go through periods of doubt, it appears that it can often take ten or more years for someone to

fully move through various maturing processes. I think I deal with my own doubt (as well as other people's lack of doubt) much better than I did ten years ago. But getting from then to now left a fair amount of carnage behind me. I credit Page for allowing me to take this incredibly difficult and haphazard journey with our marriage intact.

Unfortunately, just as I'm finding my way off the rapids, Page appears to have launched her boat upstream. And, at the moment, all I seem able to do is advise her to "hang on," as I'm not yet totally on shore myself. Earlier this year when Page decided to attend another church, I have to admit that inside I felt a sense of betrayal. When I wanted to move on, I didn't. I stayed, I gritted my teeth, and I stayed active in our tradition. I didn't mind so much that Page was finding spiritual rejuvenation in another tradition. I'm just not sure what lies ahead for our children. I've listened to Page's complaints about Mormonism, but I see most of the same problems in those other traditions. I feel that in the long run, she will only be trading one set of problems for another. I see a lot of strength in the familiar youth programs of our own tradition, including the scouting program, which I'm actively involved in.

WHAT DOES A couple do when there doesn't seem to be any answers, and when our local spiritual advisors—our parents and many of our friends—can't really understand our individual dilemmas, nor those we face as a couple. There are no guidelines, no mentors, no easy answers. We're on our own. Too often in unthinking gospel discourse, we are essentially told that if our children grow up without the gospel in their lives, our sons will become drug addicts and our daughters, trailer trash. Yet I see plenty of faithful, active Latter-day Saints with dysfunctional families.

I recently spent some time with my oldest daughter and realized that some of my kids are already smarter than I am. And I can't imagine that these kids won't come face to face with the same intellectual dilemmas regarding their Mormonism that Page and I face now. At some point in their emerging adulthood, they're going to ask themselves, "Hmmm, I wonder



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what Dad did for a living?" And when they choose to explore their father's trade, will the cognitive dissonance they will naturally encounter cause them to become hoods and whores? I pray that Page and I are trail-blazing and not bridge-burning for our children. I hope that seeing Page and me struggle with such things while attempting to find ways to repair our marriage and spirituality might give them strength to heal their own souls—and the courage to persevere with their partners in a positive way.

The dilemma of doubting is that we can place at risk our relationship with our partners often at a time when other corrosive influences, such as employment and financial difficulties, in-laws, child rearing, educational advancement, and issues related to personal maturation, are already pulling at our relationships. I see Page dealing with her doubts the best way she knows how. Knowledge, for all its benefits, has its costs. I'm sure Mother Eve was unsure about what would result from her choice, but she understood one thing: there would be pain, death, heartache and sorrow—but "there is no other way."

Page's Story

OUR STORY BEGAN way before I had met and married Thomas. When I was baptized at eight, my father was in the bishopric. Not long after that, however, my father stopped attending church as regularly and quit going to the temple altogether. The hardest part for me was not understanding what was going on in his head and why he had stopped believing. Unfortunately, he didn't answer any of these

questions for me. I guess he felt he was protecting my faith, or maybe it was out of respect for my mother, who was a staunch believer and desperately trying to keep us children active and faithful to the Church. I spent my youth hearing about eternal families, and I knew I didn't belong to one. In my naïve mind, I assumed it was because my father didn't care enough about us to want to be with us for eternity. So I was bound and determined to marry someone whose faith was strong and whose testimony was unshakable. I wasn't going to be the woman who dragged her children to church alone, feeling alone in her worship of God, and praying every day that her husband would see the light.

Enter Thomas Kimball. Spiritually, he was everything that I had wanted in an eternal companion. His enthusiasm for learning about the Church and the gospel was infectious. I couldn't be around him without wanting to learn more myself. When he talked about the temple and the mysteries it held, his face lit up, and he would continually say to me, "Wait until you go for yourself, Page. It's magical." When we read the scriptures together, he had a way of bringing out information that I had never thought of, or he would help me understand a passage as I had never understood it before. Spiritually, he lifted me to a higher ground.

When Thomas first started talking about his doubts, I was annoyed. Annoyance quickly became anger, and then fear. The more he tried to talk to me about it, the more I distanced myself. I didn't want to hear his doubts. I hadn't read all the books he had read, and I didn't know how to respond to his accusations of abuse and untruths within Mormonism. I kept thinking he was just listening to the wrong people, reading the wrong books. And I really didn't like Sunstone. I remember one day blowing up and saying, "If you don't believe in it, why are you still going to church?" Immediately, I wanted to take

those words back, because I knew I was going to push him so hard that he'd stop coming. His response was that he was just trying to figure it all out and couldn't I just understand that? Unfortunately, I didn't have the ability to do that for him then.

About this same time, he started to work at Benchmark Books, and he and Dan Wotherspoon would have lengthy conversations. Needless to say, I wasn't crazy about Dan. I felt he was leading Tom down a slippery slope. However, with time, I realized that Dan was acting as the sounding board that I couldn't be for Tom. Tom needed someone to talk with, and being in the Benchmark environment gave that to him, whether it was interactions with his co-workers or with the customers. And although I wanted Tom to be able to talk with me, every time he did, I became agitated and angry. I felt like the little girl again, and I just couldn't understand why he didn't love me enough to just believe. For me, couldn't he just put all his doubts aside and believe? Well, as many of you know, it doesn't work that way. Thomas and I were both being torn up inside, both of us seeking for something that the other couldn't provide.

After sitting through multiple lessons on how we should rid evil influences from our lives, and how we should not listen to those who would destroy our testimony, I remember thinking, "But what if that influence is your husband? What do you do when the person who is poisoning your testimony is your husband? Do I get rid of him? I can't just throw him away like I can with a book, or stop spending time with him, like I can with an acquaintance."

I don't remember when exactly it happened, but one day I realized that I needed to stop looking at Thomas through the Church's eyes. Because when I judged him according to the Church, he was failing miserably. He was not leading our family in prayer, Family Home Evening, or scripture study. He had stopped going to the temple. By all official Church accounts, he was a poor Mormon husband. When I decided to start looking at him differently, I realized he was an incredible man, that he loved me and the children with a deep, steadfast love, that he supported me in my dreams and goals. He was sexy, intelligent, funny, and charismatic. And suddenly I loved him for who he was, not for who I wanted him to be. I decided to stop looking at all the things I thought he wasn't and focus on the things that he was.

THE THING WAS, though, in seeing Thomas in this way, I also began to let go of the Church. Because of my earlier determination not to be the woman sitting alone in the pew with my children and praying desperately that my husband would believe, I felt I had to choose between the Church and my marriage. Some women can balance the two, but I couldn't. I had to let go of all my preconceived notions of how a marriage partnership should be and start celebrating the beauty within our relationship.

I started really listening to Thomas and his issues about the Church. I read some of the same articles and books that he had read. Before this time, if the information that I read was contrary to the Church's teachings, I would dismiss it as a problem

with the authorship. The authors obviously had axes to grind; they had stopped listening to the Holy Ghost; they had fallen into heretical ways; or they were immoral, and that led them to fall out of line with Mormon doctrine and authority. By the time I was ready to listen to Thomas, I had met a lot of the authors whose work I was reading, and I knew them to be some of the most moral, intelligent, truth-seeking individuals I had ever met. I couldn't easily dismiss their words, and for the first time, I decided to look at the Church objectively. It wasn't long before I had some of the same issues and questions that Tom had.

I think it is odd that throughout all of this, we have remained relatively active in our ward. We seem to teeter-totter about what we should do about our disbelief. When he was frustrated and wanted to quit attending church, I still felt there was a place for me—that I could help other people who were struggling just like me. Then when I decided that I wanted to throw in the towel, that I couldn't stand another Sunday lesson on obedience, Thomas wanted to go and felt it was important for him to continue being involved.

At the beginning of this year, I felt like I wasn't getting anything out of my Sunday worship in our ward, so I began attending other churches. I found a quaint little Bible church where I loved the preacher's sermons. When I left services, I felt rejuvenated and inspired to do better and be a better person. The sermons focused on real-life issues, and there wasn't the implied condemnation for imperfection that I often felt in Mormon settings. Also, in contrast to my experiences in the LDS Church, the people didn't profess to have all the answers; they all were seeking for a connection with their God just like I was.

But wouldn't you know it, Tom now feels completely comfortable in his elders quorum. He has found a way to balance his disbelief (which he openly admits to the other class members) and his feeling of belonging. I really don't want to separate our family into two different religions, and because he was willing to attend the Mormon Church all those years for me, I feel like I can do the same for him now. I have decided it is not about the religion as much as it is about my relationship with God.

The upside of this whole process is that Tom and I no longer have to hide our true feelings, worrying that we will hurt the other. We can be angry, sad, or just laugh together at some of the quirkiness within our church. In a sense, we have bonded in our frustrations regarding our religion.

However, although we both sense spirituality in our own lives, we don't share it within our relationship. I would like to change this—whether through meditation, reading, talking, or something else. Both of us are longing for this, but we are still searching separately. It is hard to make the shift, because we have become comfortable with our relationship right now, and reaching for something new might mean opening up ourselves and our beliefs for criticism from the other partner. It is easy to define what we mutually believe or don't believe, but it is hard to express a heartfelt belief the other doesn't share. Although I realize we do not have to have the same beliefs to respect each

other, Tom's opinion means a lot to me, and I just don't want to recreate the chasm that we once had between us. I would love to seek our spiritual purpose together.

Ruth and John's Story

RUTH: We are here to introduce ourselves, tell our story, and say whether our relationship is better or worse since John left the Church five years ago. We have decided to do this by sharing a dialogue that John and I have actually had—with some editing, of course.

JOHN: I'll start. I grew up in the Midwest. My parents converted when I was three. I always felt that the Church was an integral part of me. That is, until I met you, whose identity *really* was integrated with your Church membership. I didn't appreciate how much this was so until after I left the Church. I realized then that my Church membership had always been a choice for me, a voluntary association, not so much a part of me. I don't mean to say that my commitment to the Church was in any way shallow. It's just that I didn't identify it with my "being" to the degree that you do. I felt as if I had been adopted into the fold, but for you, it seems more like a birthright.

RUTH: Yeah. We have since realized the differences in the way we were a part of the Church. I was born into a family that had ancestral Mormon roots on both sides. I was raised in Utah, and I now understand how the Church was a big part of my identity. From my family of origin, to my religion, to the geographical culture I was raised in, I was Mormon to the core. I often say it is in my DNA. I, of course, didn't really know this either before we moved to Indiana and I noticed how different Mormons could be.

JOHN: This discussion sometimes bothers me because it seems to imply that it was easier for me to leave than it would be for a Utah Mormon. But, if I'm honest with myself, that's probably true. But it certainly wasn't easy for me at the time, especially being married.

RUTH: What—married with ties to a Utah Mormon? Do you know what I mean by that?

JOHN: Yeah, partly because you are a Utah Mormon, and partly because of the way you viewed our spiritual development as a joint endeavor.

RUTH: I am still a little baffled by the fact that you did not think it was a joint endeavor. Can you explain how you escaped that paradigm in the Mormon Church with its doctrine about achieving salvation as a family?

JOHN: Yes. Of course Mormons believe in eternal families, but it's not like they believe that one spouse is going to be dammed if the other one is. They believe they will be given a worthy spouse in the afterlife if the one in this life doesn't make it. I have always believed, and still believe, that we are alone with God in the most fundamental sense. I mean, even if you don't believe in God, or you just believe in a void, you ultimately have to face that alone. People can help you, but no one can do it for you. I don't believe in group

salvation nor the notion that we are saved or damned together. Does that answer your question?

RUTH: No, because I am very offended by the idea that I would be "given to another." Not being able to be with the spouse of my choice—that doesn't sound like any type of heaven I would choose.

JOHN: Oh, but once you get to heaven, you will choose it, because you wouldn't want to be separated from the presence of God.

RUTH: I don't want to be married to God, though. I choose you. I want to be a god with you.

JOHN: So I screwed that up!

RUTH: Yes . . . and no. Yes, you screwed that up because I feel you have left me to be alone in a journey of spiritual growth that was to be ours to create together. And no, you did not screw that up, because I do not believe that I will be given to another or choose another. I think that heaven is about being with our families. We choose our families of creation here, and we will choose them there. Mormons believe in eternal progression, and we will need eternity to become gods anyway.

JOHN: And here we are back to one of our theological debates about whether there is upward movement between the degrees of glory in the post-life or whether there is a glass ceiling.

RUTH: Yeah, I understand that I make the doctrine fit my preferences and my issues. But, so does everyone else.

JOHN: Here we get down to another critical difference in the way you see being Mormon and the way I do. I grant that you have always had the history, and perhaps you have even embraced the standards and the lifestyle more fully than I did. But I don't think you have ever taken the doctrine as seriously as I did. And even now as you play fast and loose with it, I can see why you could not understand why I left, because for me, in and out of the Church, it has always been about the doctrine.

RUTH: No it wasn't. You were making the doctrine fit your life, and when it didn't fit anymore, you rejected it.

JOHN: I agree that I was creating my own version of doctrine as everyone else does. You can't avoid interpretation, but you can do it more or less consciously. And I think I have always placed more value than you have on at least trying to preserve the integrity of the doctrine—meaning I was trying to get it right as opposed to picking and choosing. For me it was all or nothing, so I had to consciously manipulate some doctrines as I got closer to that crisis point when I left.

RUTH: It's the all-or-nothing attitude that precedes apostasy.

JOHN: I agree with that, but I think we are off topic.

RUTH: What is the topic?

JOHN: Our relationship.

RUTH: Well, what we have discussed already are symbolic of the emotions and insecurities in our relationship. As the story goes, I remember we went to get our temple recommends renewed. You were the Young Men's president at the time. I was a counselor in the Relief Society. We had recently read some controversial readings together. I knew you were coming to terms with some of the Church's

I was not playing a Mormon wife role by loving you. I was Ruth in love with John, no roles necessary.

tainted history, but I had no idea you would come out of that temple recommend interview without a recommend and having asked the branch president to release you from your calling.

I thought, "Okay, this is okay—John needs to work some things out." Looking back, I don't know why I was surprised when finally you told me you had given the branch president a letter listing the reasons why you did not believe in Mormonism anymore and then asked to have your name removed from the records. But, the moment you told me, it was as if you had just punched me terribly hard in the stomach. I doubled over and could not breathe. I was disoriented, I didn't know if I should hit you, collapse, or just get the hell out of the apartment. I was betrayed by the fact that you told the branch president (a kind of stranger) before you told me. I remember thinking, "What does this mean as far as what I am supposed to do now?" I had dated non-members and had decided long ago that I wanted a priesthood holder. I wanted the possibility of going on a mission as an elderly couple. I wanted a Mormon family. I did not want this! I was thinking, "Doubt, fine. Struggle, fine. But, give up? Leave? Who are you now? This is not what I chose!"

I have later come to appreciate the fictitious person I had imagined and called husband. In a very real sense, I needed to get to know you—maybe for the first time. We had to start over again, didn't we?

JOHN: Yeah, we did. We had assumed that we knew certain things about each other because of our joint commitment to the Church, not realizing that we were committed for different reasons and in different ways. I remember feeling as if I had made one of the most authentic choices of my life and I was truly being myself. Therefore, I saw your reaction to my leaving as a rejection of who I really am. I mean, I wasn't blind-sided by your reaction. I saw it coming—and that is why I put off telling you, and largely because I was afraid you would talk me out of it. I was afraid of what my reaction would be when faced with the choice of being true to myself and being true to our LDS marriage.

RUTH: So even though you were not surprised by my reaction, you still felt betrayed as well?

JOHN: Yeah, it is ironic. I mean, I didn't even know who I was at that point or even what I was going to do next. But I felt that you had absolutely no respect for the little piece of myself that I had finally carved out separate from the Church's mold. So you became for a time almost an enemy to me. My love for you compelled me to compromise the little integrity I felt I had achieved, and when I did that, I hated



myself, and I hated you. I guess that is how love is turned into hate. Fortunately we didn't stay there.

RUTH: Yeah, I hated you, too. I could think only of myself and what you were doing to me. I did not see your struggle. I only saw how my marriage was being sabotaged. I had to make a decision about whether I wanted to stay married to you or not. I began seeing ways that you are an amazing man separate from having to be amazing as a priesthood holder. You were a great lover, a great father—you had goals and ambition. You really cared about me. I knew you cared because you listened to me and allowed me to hurt. I made the decision that I wanted you with or without your Church membership. I think my love for you deepened because it seemed more real. I mean, I was not playing a Mormon wife role by loving you. I was Ruth in love with John, no roles necessary. I was still angry and hurt, though. I still had a lot of questions about how we were going to raise our family now. What would our family look like with regard to spiritual rituals that had always been important to me?

JOHN: Yeah, once you realized that I was not going back to the Church, you had to ask, "Okay, what kind of family religious life are we going to create together?" I was still working out what kind of religious life I wanted to live by myself, which I felt needed to be worked out first. We fought about that for a while—the priority of those two questions.

RUTH: I remember continuing to be baffled by the lack of "family" integration into your spiritual development. I was annoyed by your lack of consideration of how this family of



our creation was to move in any direction without you.

JOHN: We are still working that one out.

RUTH: Yeah. However, I remember a significant turning point for me in our relationship. I remember asking myself: "Why am I waiting for John to come up with a spiritual map for our family? I have my own life, my own spirituality, and my own talents I can share with our children without him." I never wanted to be alone in this, but I was. I was not going to whine any longer and pine for your attention to take some initiative in spiritual matters. I was making a hard and hurtful decision to let go of my expectation that you lead our family in spiritual rituals, but this decision was ultimately healthy for our relationship. This decision was not made out of anger and resentment in response to you, but for once, I was deciding for me. I felt suddenly powerful and amazingly capable. I did not tell you about this decision until later. At the time, it felt good not to include you. I was on my way to being free from you.

JOHN: I remember when you did tell me. I felt on the one hand relieved and excited for you because I didn't think the level of dependence in that area was healthy for either of us. However, it did feel like another rejection of me (which I suppose it was), and that hurt.

RUTH: I was not rejecting you as much as rejecting the expectation that you be the one to take the initiative in religious and spiritual matters for our family. I did not feel dependent on you as much as I just depended on you to be my partner in this.

JOHN: Now we are negotiating better and compromising the details of how we are going to raise our kids. You are in school, and you are going to have a career of your own, and

*I have to believe that
being stronger individuals,
we will be stronger as a couple.*

you have interests and goals and a whole life independent of me. And I feel both proud of you and relieved that I am not responsible for your spiritual life. There is no doubt that you and I are stronger individuals for having been through this struggle, that we are more whole, more integrated as individuals. And I believe—I have to believe—that being stronger individuals, we will be stronger as a couple.

RUTH: I think we are stronger as a couple because we are stronger as individuals. We are not as threatened by our differences now. We can disagree or agree with each other without having to take it so personally. You have always been my biggest supporter in going for my goals in spite of what some may consider the selfish nature of them. You have been a good example of living an authentic life (leaving the Church being one of those authentic decisions). I will always be grateful to you for showing me that I must be who I want to be and everyone else will have to catch up eventually. You stayed with me. I am so glad that you did not "outgrow" me and leave.

JOHN: But sometimes I feel very distant from you, and I miss you. It's ironic, because for years, I have been wanting to disentangle our relationship. But I sometimes fear that we don't have enough bonds anymore to make it through. I wonder how we can maintain our hard-won autonomy while also preserving our relationship. When I was in the Church, I think we were lazy because we assumed that we had the Church and the Church lifestyle in common. Now I mourn for the loss of that feeling of closeness that came from our shared commitment, even if it was an illusion. The saying goes that all knowledge leads away from some Garden of Eden. I suppose that is as true in marriage as in the rest of life.


RUTH: I miss you, too. I miss sharing the stupid religious symbols that still have meaning to me. And I wish you would share more of what symbolizes spirituality to you. I guess we are at a point where we want to share more but we do not want to go back to relying on each other for anything. I think that is a loss for us.

JOHN: Lately, that sense of loss has been getting the best of me. And I have this feeling, like Mike said, that I want to excise whole years of our history. At those times, I have to remind myself of a favorite quotation:

It's no good trying to fool yourself about love. You can't fall into it like a soft job without dirtying up your hands. It takes muscle and guts. And if you can't bear the thought of messing up your nice, clean soul, you better give up the whole idea of life, and become a saint, because you'll never make it as a human being. It's either this life or the next.³

RUTH: I have always liked that quotation, too.

JOHN: When I left the Church, I also gave up on the idea of becoming a saint (in both senses of the word). I chose this life, messy and dirty as it is. You are a huge part of that life, and you are an example to me of the “muscle and guts” it takes to really live life. I’m glad I have you with me to share it all.

RUTH: I am thankful every day that you still choose to be with me. 

Panelists

RONDA AND MIKE CALLISTER. RONDA is a professor of organizational behavior at Utah State University. MIKE is a urologist in private practice in Logan, Utah. Ronda and Mike have been married for thirty years and have four daughters and four grandchildren.

PAGE AND TOM KIMBALL. PAGE is a nursing student at Utah Valley State College. TOM is marketing director for Signature Books and book review editor for the *Journal of*

EDITOR’S NOTE: A dynamic comment period followed the panelists’ remarks in this symposium session. During this discussion, as in several of the presentations published above, faith-development theory, primarily as articulated by James W. Fowler in his book, Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning came up several times. The panelists who had explored Fowler’s work found it helpful in understanding their own faith journeys, as well as those of their spouse’s. As such, I felt it important to include a brief overview of Stages Three to Five, which characterize most adult faith development.

The following are descriptions from an interview Fowler gave to Harold Kent Straughn. The full interview from which this is taken can be found at <http://www.lifespirls.com/TheMindSpiral/Fowler/fowler.html>.

STAGE THREE: SYNTHETIC/CONVENTIONAL FAITH

[This stage typically begins to] rise beginning around age twelve or thirteen. It’s marked by the beginning of what Piaget calls formal operational thinking. That simply means that we now can think about our own thinking. It’s a time when a person is typically concerned about forming an identity and is deeply concerned about the evaluations and feedback from significant other people in his or her life. We call this a synthetic/conventional stage; synthetic, not in the sense that it’s artificial, but in the sense that it’s a pulling together of one’s valued images and values, the pulling together of a sense of self or identity.

One of the hallmarks of this stage is that it tends to compose its images of God as extensions of interpersonal relationships. God is often experienced as Friend, Companion, and Personal Reality, in relationship to which I’m known deeply and valued. I think the true religious hunger of adolescence is to have a God who knows me and values me deeply and can be a kind of guarantor of my identity and worth in a world where I’m struggling to find who I can be.

At any of the stages from two on, you can find adults who are best described by these stages. Stage Three, thus, can be an adult stage. We do find many persons, in churches and out, who are best described by faith that essentially took form when they were adolescents.

STAGE FOUR: INDIVIDUATIVE/PROJECTIVE FAITH

Stage Four, for those who develop it, is a time in which the person is pushed out of, or steps out of, the circle of interpersonal relationships that have sustained his life to that point. Now comes the burden of re-

Mormon History. Page and Tom have been married for seventeen years and have five children.

RUTH OGDEN AND JOHN HALSTEAD. RUTH is a marriage and family therapy graduate student at Purdue University, Calumet, and is active in her Highland, Indiana, ward. JOHN is an attorney. Ruth and John have been married for nine years and have two children.

NOTES

1. “Pillars of My Faith,” 1989 Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium, tape/CD/download SL89069.

2. In saying this, I realize that at least from a long-term perspective, especially if one believes affiliating with the Church is ultimately a good thing, this phenomenon of one spouse going through a doubt stage without the other fully on board is probably a good thing. If both members of the couple were to begin doubting at the same time, they might very well help feed each other’s angst in such a way that they will both resign their memberships. Whereas if they enter into their periods of doubt at different times, the pull of the more orthodox spouse will most likely act as a check to the other making a hasty decision regarding continuing LDS affiliation.

3. John Osborne, from his play *Look Back in Anger*. In 1958, it was made into a film by the same name.

flecting upon the self as separate from the groups and the shared world that define one’s life. I sometimes quote Santayana who said that we don’t know who discovered water but we know it wasn’t fish. The person in Stage Three is like the fish sustained by the water. To enter Stage Four means to spring out of the fish tank and to begin to reflect upon the water. Many people don’t complete this transition but get caught between three and four. The transition to Stage Four can begin as early as seventeen, but it’s usually not completed until the mid-twenties and often doesn’t even begin until around twenty. It comes most naturally in young adulthood. Some people, however, don’t make the transition until their late thirties. It becomes a more traumatic thing then, because they have already built an adult life. Their relationships have to be reworked in light of the stage change.

Stage Four is concerned about boundaries: where I stop and you begin; where the group that I can belong to with conviction and authenticity ends and other groups begin. It’s very much concerned about authenticity and a fit between the self I feel myself to be in a group and the ideological commitments that I’m attached to.

STAGE FIVE: CONJUNCTIVE FAITH

Sometime around thirty-five or forty or beyond, some people undergo a change to what we call conjunctive faith, which is a kind of midlife way of being in faith. What Stage Four works so hard to get clear and clean in terms of boundaries and identity, Stage Five makes more permeable and more porous. As one moves into Stage Five, one begins to recognize that the conscious self is not all there is of me. I have an unconscious. Much of my behavior and response to things is shaped by dimensions of self that I’m not fully aware of. There is a deepened readiness for a relationship to God that includes God’s mystery and unavailability and strangeness as well as God’s closeness and clarity.

Stage Five is a time when a person is also ready to look deeply into the social unconscious—those myths and taboos and standards that we took in with our mother’s milk and that powerfully shape our behavior and responses. We really do examine those, which means we’re ready for a new kind of intimacy with persons and groups that are different from ourselves. We are ready for allegiances beyond our tribal gods and our tribal taboos. Stage Five is a period when one is alive to paradox. One understands that truth has many dimensions which have to be held together in paradoxical tension.