

Brief Sketch of Events Surrounding My Resignation

My Spiritual and Apologetic Background

I grew up in a highly faithful LDS family,¹ and I was serious about living the Gospel as a child and youth (for instance, I participated in the conversion of a friend during my Senior year of high school), but my fervor for the Gospel diminished somewhat during my late teen years until I went into the MTC.

I was in a pretty low place when I entered the MTC, but I decided to give it my best effort to see if there was any real validity to the Gospel. In the MTC I had strong, confirmatory spiritual experiences,² determined that the Gospel was indeed true, and decided I could do nothing better with my life than to sacrifice it completely for the cause.³ I was a fully dedicated missionary and deeply enjoyed my missionary experience.

Shortly before I started high school, a close relative—who was a member of the Stake Presidency at the time—[left the Church due to “anti-mormon” literature](#).⁴ His departure cast a sort of pall over my family’s beliefs and seemed to me like a sort of intellectual challenge just left hanging in the air. Nobody in my family seemed willing or able to mount an intellectual defense against his arguments⁵ so on my mission I began an intense study of the apologetic arguments for the Church’s truthfulness, attempting to sustain intellectually what I felt certain of spiritually.

I was guided by the idea that if the Gospel was really true then there was no reason to fear investigating it comprehensively.⁶ I reasoned that the problem with my close relative was not that he had studied too much, but that he had not studied deeply enough, and he had not lived with enough dedication to prevent his loss of faith.

¹Our family was [highly faithful to the Church way of life](#). To a large extent, our dedication to the Church ramped up as a response to my close relative leaving.

²I had a very strong spiritual experience one night while praying about the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon (very strong, sustained [feeling of elevation](#)). I also persistently experienced the feelings of the Spirit in the MTC and during my mission. I have persistently felt the feelings of the Spirit throughout my adult life, and until my faith transition always interpreted these as confirmation of the Church’s foundational truth claims.

³An example of my level of devotion was that I had my brother at home throw away my entire “secular” music collection (which I had greatly valued before) because I did not want any distractions to my spiritual development. I also convinced all my younger siblings to throw away all (well, most) of their “secular” music.

⁴Mormon apologist and scholar Grant Hardy [recommends retiring the term “anti-mormon.”](#) I only use it because readers are likely to easily understand the label, not because I feel it is especially accurate.

⁵My parents never actually shared the arguments or data with us directly, but it was obvious that we had no legitimate answers since my dad would relate to us his response to my close relative in terms like this: “I don’t have any answers to these issues, I just know it makes me happy and it’s the best system I know to raise children, so I’m going to keep doing it.”

⁶I followed after the thinking of Elder George A. Smith:

If a faith will not bear to be investigated, if its preachers and professors are afraid to have it examined; their foundation must be very weak. (Journal of Discourses v 14, p. 216)

From my missionary experience I was very familiar with the tight relationship between spirituality and testimony, so I focused equally intensely on my spiritual development. I consistently tried to live the most important aspects of the Gospel (love, service, and humility) while not neglecting all the other facets that seemed important (scripture study, prayer, fasting, Sabbath observance, magnify callings, do Home Teaching consistently and for the right reasons, etc.).⁷

So, for the past twenty years I remained firm in that pattern of intensely studying apologetics,⁸ focusing on my spiritual development, and building my testimony.⁹ Of course, even though mounting a defense against my close relative was an initial catalyst and continual motivator, I also enjoyed living the Gospel for its own sake and was happy to be doing the right things for their intrinsic value and not necessarily as a challenge to my close relative—with whom, funny enough, I have never actually had a discussion about the Church to this day!

Investigating Other Models

Over the years, multiple data points that I had come across did not square well with the LDS narratives (or apologetic arguments), and these had piled onto my “shelf” over time.¹⁰ However, as a faculty member whose paycheck depended on having

⁷Nobody can perfectly observe all the minutia expected of them in the LDS Church, but I feel like I have always tried my best to do the right things for the right reasons (and in tandem with the power/grace of the atonement).

⁸I studied the LDS apologetic arguments intensely [for the last 20 years](#).

⁹I took [my spiritual development very seriously](#). Now that I’ve left, family members have criticized me for taking the Gospel *too seriously*, but I do not think my actions are inconsistent with the messages taught in lesson manuals, church literature, and General Conference—if anything I felt like I was perpetually falling short so I should humbly continue to improve and become *more* dedicated.

¹⁰Many of the issues that piled up for me revolved around actively trying to *harmonize* the Gospel with the scientific record (e.g., evolution, no death before the fall, the Garden of Eden in Missouri, a global flood, etc.). In addition, three exceptional individuals I associated with during my time at BYU exposed me to alternative models and perspectives:

1. A close neighbor was one of the founders of [rationalfaiths.com](#) and shared with me many of his issues with the Church.
2. A colleague at BYU shared with me his doubts about the historicity of the Book of Mormon.
3. A grad student I associated with followed generally after [Denver Snuffer](#), claimed to have spoken face-to-face with the Savior (like Snuffer), and was confident the Church was in apostasy.

I had many discussions with these individuals, but through it I maintained my belief in the truthfulness of the Gospel and defended the Church’s position (invoking much nuance and drawing upon my years of studying the apologetic literature). Still, I was certainly exposed to more issues and ways of thinking about the data. And, more importantly, each of these individuals defied my expectations of someone who had lost their testimony. Each had read widely, none of these individuals were at all lazy and each was earnestly striving to do what they thought was best. Directly and indirectly it became clear that none of them had a “porn problem”, as is often assumed about those who lose their testimony. My neighbor was a very generous, thoughtful person and excellent father. My colleague was extremely dedicated to Christ and was not “worldly” at all (he read religious texts for enjoyment and was very dedicated to studying and performing spiritually focused classical music). The grad student read the scriptures more vigorously than anyone else I had ever met and was highly dedicated to his spiritual journey (for instance, he seriously considered doing a 40 day fast).

a temple recommend (and hence testimony) it was fairly easy to downplay these concerns in my mind while I was at BYU.

After leaving BYU¹¹ I no longer felt that it was imperative that I defend the Church's position. Rather, I could freely investigate all the issues that had been bothering me, and I could do so in an unbiased¹² and scientifically rigorous fashion.¹³ I also felt confident with my spiritual foundation, internal motivations, and general behavior to know that I was not seeking to justify any sinful behavior. Finally, my experience in science and apologetics had taught me the importance of examining the primary data myself and not relying on the interpretations of others. So, I dug into it—but unlike during my years as an apologist, I examined *all* the evidence and *all* the interpretations.

After carefully examining alternative models for the Church's foundational truth claims, I decided that alternative models fit the data *much* better than the LDS narratives (*either official or apologetic*). In my opinion, the fit is remarkable even using only the data that is generally accepted / acknowledged by LDS apologists.¹⁴

My wife and I worked through this analysis and its consequences together (we read a lot and took many long walks together talking through the data and arguments). Spiritually, this change in perspective felt to us more like a natural outgrowth of a positive spiritual and life trajectory, hence terms like “faith-crisis” and “faith-transition” don't do a great job of capturing the contours of this experience for us.

¹¹I was a Professor at BYU for a number of years. I left BYU because I sensed that it wasn't going to be the kind of future I wanted (i.e., I could see that funding levels and job satisfaction were directly correlated as a professor at BYU and my funding level was not great). I loved my department and all facets of the job (although the cumulative stress level was very high). I left on great terms with everyone there and was told by the chair that I would have received my next advancement had I not left—and he wanted me to stay. I had great teaching scores (very high on spiritually strengthening in particular—even for science classes) and an exceptional publication record. I've been invited to work on new start-ups coming from BYU and to apply for positions in other departments at BYU.

¹²According to Hugh B. Brown in General Conference, 1962:

The honest investigator must be prepared to follow wherever the search of truth may lead. Truth is often found in the most unexpected places. He must, with fearless and open mind 'insist that facts are far more important than any cherished, mistaken beliefs.'

¹³The instrumentation we used in our scientific work was the best available at certain kinds of measurements (e.g., trying to quantify the amount and type of every protein in a collection of cells), but we were studying phenomena that had never been comprehensively studied before. Hence, we were frequently tasked with trying to decide how reliable our measurements were but where it was not immediately obvious how that could be done. I think that many of these ideas about estimating or bounding certainty in circumstances where the certainty is not immediately obvious apply directly to models attempting to explain the foundational truth-claims of the Church.

¹⁴I freely acknowledge that a person, given different presuppositions based on their experience and values, may examine the same evidence and arrive at somewhat different conclusions from me. However, I do not believe that a person can carefully examine alternative models and come away thinking that those who decide these alternative models fit the data better are merely lazy, wanting to sin, etc.—the alternative models fit the data extremely well from any perspective, “faithful” or not.

Resignation

After about a year of having decided alternative models fit better and only becoming more confident in that assessment over time, I felt morally obligated to resign from the Church. I finished out tithing season as ward finance clerk, trained a replacement, and then formally resigned from the Church in January 2016.

The Present

Even though this has been a positive experience in general, it's still very challenging to transition from the faith that I held dearly for the vast majority of my life. My wife and I are still working through the various stages of grief.

This transition has also influenced many of my relationships with friends and family.¹⁵ The process of rebuilding those relationships has been quite challenging but has generally gone well.

This time of viewing life from outside the Gospel/Church perspective—which is the only perspective I've ever really known—has been one of the most enlightening phases of my life (similar to the major enlightenment I experienced on my mission). Many things that never quite made sense suddenly have an explanation to my mind, and that's extremely satisfying.¹⁶ And, as far as my own sense of moral obligation goes, I feel confident that [morality transcends religious belief](#) and is still central to living a good life.

At least to this point, I have found that the contours of life and friendship remain mostly the same: life is meaningful as we serve, love, and try to understand one another. We feel good about ourselves as we try to remain humble, to stretch ourselves to do better, and to become more. And life is intrinsically wonderful, especially as we focus on all that is good and the common threads that bind us together on our journey.

¹⁵The Church provides a huge swath of common ground upon which many relationships are built. Hence, it makes sense that the disruption of this common ground (at least in some part) results in the unsettling of many relationships in proportion to the importance of it to the relationship (which is often not appreciated beforehand). In addition, the manner in which a faith transition influences a relationship is highly contingent upon [the mindset of the Church member](#)—those with an individual growth mindset will likely view the change favorably or at least in neutral terms, while those with more of a totalistic mindset will be inclined to sever the relationship to avoid risking loss of testimony due to association. The relationship outcome is, of course, also dependent on the posture/attitude of the person transitioning (e.g., do they present a threat to testimony?).

¹⁶For instance, now that I'm outside the Church, I feel like I better understand [the main motivating mindsets](#) at play in the Church.