



From the Ashes

Journal entries and memorabilia from a trip through hell

Derek Sorensen

And behold, ... thou hast suffered afflictions and much sorrow ... Nevertheless, Jacob, my firstborn in the wilderness, thou knowest the greatness of God; and he shall consecrate thine afflictions for thy gain.

2 Nephi 2 : 1 – 2

Introduction

I have had four very dark years since the months leading up to coming out publicly in February 2018. I have never experienced such a barrage of unrelenting negative emotion in my life. I hope I never have to do that again. It has taken constant, painstaking effort to claw my way back to emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual health. Lucky for me, I am writing this in probably the healthiest state I have ever been in my life.

While my experience is, in some ways, unique to me, I'm hoping that it will be relatable to anyone who chooses to read about it. We all have very dark times in our lives, perhaps most presently this COVID disaster we've gone (are going) through together. For me, the suffering and isolation from repetitive lockdowns has been both painful and instructive, probably something true of most suffering we endure. It aggravated some difficult emotions already present in my life from last four years, compounding some of the feelings of homelessness and isolation I was already feeling, and forcing on me (on many of us) the greatest experiments on loneliness and isolation from others that I (we), hopefully, will ever have to face.

Coming out on the other side of all this, piecing our lives together, I think it's time to reflect on our suffering, process it, and integrate it into our beings so that we can become better through it.

For me the last four years have been raw, dark, terrible years; but they will no doubt constitute one of the most transformative times of my life. In the battle against this persistent tidal wave of negative emotion, life has forced changes upon me, and I have, very much against my will, had to finally face some dark and powerful demons.

This text is a descriptive compilation on my last few years, starting with largely unedited excerpts from my journal. It finishes with some short essays in which I attempt to describe other aspects of my spiritual journey of reconciling my sexuality with Christianity. This is raw, terrible writing, often repetitive, and even nonsensical. I am trying to show my mental and emotional journey in the rawest of forms, displaying my process as it was rather than as I'd like it to have been. I wrote in my journal with the full expectation that no one would ever read it except me. I hope that means that the entries describe me and my experience more accurately than if I were to attempt to do it now in a narrative form.

I believe that suffering is a fundamental truth of life and that I'm grateful to have my own share of the darkness. I believe that God consecrates suffering for our benefit, in whatever form that takes. I believe that the only way to transcend the suffering of life is to embrace it, look it in the eyes, and descend into the darkness willingly. In doing so, we follow Jesus, and come out very much alive on the other side.

If you choose to read this, I only ask that you please forgive me my journey and the great many weaknesses that this text exposes.

Journal Excerpts (2018—2019)

Saturday, Jan 20, 2018

I am not well emotionally. Not at all. I went through an emotionally traumatic experience today ... And I don't know when I'll recover. I just came home and watched TV.

Right now I am very unhealthy and imbalanced emotionally. And for the sake of my mental and emotional health something needs to change. I don't yet understand this but I don't know if I can endure another move on my own. Like what I've been doing, with no constancy. I need stability and my mental health is deteriorating because of it.

I would feel much stronger if I weren't so alone ... I just feel like I am alone and don't have people I can rely on. I need hugs. I need a hug. And someone who believes in me to encourage me. And someone to talk to.

I am just. so. alone. And it hurts to be alone. I feel like I've been alone now for the last while. It's not true but I feel that way. And it really hurts.

Sigh. Life is really taxing right now. Emotionally very hard.

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Thursday, Feb 1, 2018

Man. Life as a gay Mormon is tough. I have things to work through. I just really, really, really wish that there were a place for me in this church to be gay and happy. But being gay doesn't define me. I don't play by other peoples' rules. And being gay doesn't have to be such a negative thing — I can brand myself exactly as I please.

Being a man and being gay is hard. It's a strange beast. Man, I would love so much to be happy and gay and in the church no problem. But this is the life I've been given, and this is how I need to move forward. I need to address the issues at hand. I need to confront and talk about the issues.

And I can't hide behind a facade anymore. I don't want to date women. At all. I played tennis with one today. It was tons of fun — but again, I'm gay. No sparks. If I weren't gay I think that I would be very into it. But I am. And I need to face that.

I'm going to call a therapist tomorrow. I don't want to be afraid of facing this issue. I want to talk openly about it to people. Let them into my life a little. And be happy and okay with the cards that I have been dealt.

For now, no wife for me.

Not even really going to look.

For now, it's just me as I am. The future is tough to see; for now I'll just glory in the mystery of it all.

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Sunday, Feb 4, 2018

It is time for me to no longer be ashamed for being gay. It's time for me to leave the denial of my being and to stop pretending to be part of a group that I am so fundamentally not a part of. This does not demean my value, it actually validates it because I am no longer in denial about the man that I am. I need to no longer be in denial about who I am. And I need to see my gayness as being an inherent, built-in part of who I am. Of my very being. And I must have self-confidence in my *whole self*.

I cannot hide any of this. I must *not* live a lie. I must not be in denial about the person that I am, but instead *COMPLETELY EMBRACE MYSELF!* I cannot live in constant shame of who I am. I cannot live, constantly avoiding a natural part of who I am, employing constantly a set of tricks to fool my peers.

But now I will no longer date women. I guess I don't need to pick women or men exclusively, but one thing is true: I will no longer live a charade. I refuse to live a lie, to live the life that I wish I had but most certainly do not.

And I will not live a charade. I will no longer live as a gay man in silence. *I must speak out.* And I must be the *man*—the MAN—that God intended for me to be. I need to come out — *to everyone*.

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Monday, Feb 5, 2018

Man, today was long and difficult to get through. I gave over four hours of lecture time today and graded a whole set of midterms. I gave them back to my first stats class and it was a really fun experience if I'm honest. It was fun to see the glad faces on it all. I'm quite pleased with how it turned out, and I'm looking forward to the future with this class.

Today was my first day of not thinking of myself as being broken and fundamentally I'm no longer uncomfortable with the whole marriage issue. I'm no longer trying to convince myself that I am heterosexual. And I hope very soon to be able to not have to pretend that I am, or feel pressure to do so. I am no longer going to pretend that I am a heterosexual, nor am I going to even put up airs about it. I'm no longer going to

even try to pursue that path. I don't think that it is the right path for me. I also think that I need to be patient with myself and long-suffering. I no longer will buy into the idea that I am broken fundamentally. I will no longer be afraid of myself or try to conform myself to fit a group and ideal that I simply do not belong to. I will not. I am me. I am not inherently unacceptable, dirty or perverted. I am not this way.

I am not of that mold, and I don't want to be. I am a gay man; I can even get married. I want to be both gay and an active member of the church.

I can no longer be ashamed of my natural self. I need to embrace myself, not live in such a denial, and come closer to the reality that God has in store for me.

Genuinely, God made me this way, and this is my life because of him. And I want to get closer to him by recognizing fully exactly who it is that I am.

I need — need! — to recognize this and really come to terms with who I am. I will no longer live in the shadows. I must fully embrace all that I am. I must fully be that man. I absolutely must. I must fully embrace myself, and lose all of the denial in which I live. I cannot do anything else if I am to know myself fully.

I really think that I am on the right track.

And it is lawful for me after all, to marry a man. I really, really wish that I could want that, truly.

Anyway. Forward ho we go!

My future is *so* uncertain. But *good uncertain*! Above all comes the Lord.

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Tuesday, February 6, 2018

I am opening up. Today I came out to one of my roommates, tomorrow I'm going to talk to my bishop and Thursday I'm going to talk to [another friend]. I want to put something up on my personal website this week and by the weekend have a Facebook post out. After that I want to not be afraid of bringing it up in casual conversation — of treating it as the thing it is: something integral to my being which affects every aspect of my life. It is indeed time to come out. Time to leave the shadows and time to embrace all that I am with no reservations. It is time to step fully into the light and to not be afraid of the man that I am. It's time to *not* be afraid! And it's time that people knew of my whole, true self. It is indeed time.

And I do believe that God is at the helm here. That He is guiding me and opening the path for me.

I am ready to take on any consequences that will come along with this decision, because it is the only way for me to move forward.

And I am looking forward *very much* to the life that I have ahead of me. I no longer fear those things to the degree that I am paralyzed, unable to act. It is time that I act. And it is time that I fully embrace the **man** that I am, with no reservations.

I do believe that life within the church is better than life without it. So I am going to take this all in due time. And since a family is no longer something I hope for, or expect, I am definitely in no rush to get one. I have no problem just being involved with my nieces' and nephews' lives.

For now.

The future is BRIGHT though!

BRIGHT!

And I need to be optimistic.

I know that the Lord has a bright future prepared for me, and it is time that I recognize fully the lot that I have been given. I need to truly see myself for the man that I am. The entire package deal. And I will no longer be afraid of that full package deal.

I am fully ME! And there is no need for me to hide it! I am not a pervert. I am a man. And this is the way that I came.

And that. Is. OKAY.

It's okay.

Man that feels good to say.

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Wednesday, February 7, 2018

Man. Life is good and everything will be OK. God has a plan. He made me just as I am and I must follow His plan for me.

I wish that it didn't involve my being alone. I wish that I could marry a man and have an eternal companion. But that is unlikely to happen I think.

Life is tough, that is true. But that doesn't mean that it has to be sad. Life is beautiful and abundant. Life

is full, and a life in the gospel of Jesus Christ is even more beautiful.

I have a mission to fulfill in this life. Without even a tiny doubt. And I need to fulfill that mission as something sent from God. And in order for me to be able to fulfill that, I need to follow the promptings of the Spirit. And I know that, as I do so, I will be happy, have all that I need, and feel genuine fulfillment.

Being gay is not easy. Being gay as a Mormon is *really* not easy. But it's something that I was meant to be. It's something that I was supposed to come down here and face.

It is a part of who I am. It is a part of the man that I am becoming.

And it. Is. TIME.

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Thursday, February 8, 2018

It feels so good to be open about being gay. I love it. I'm starting to suspect that the very thing that I feared may come true: my lack of companionship and the hard questions that came with that may begin to creep up and I may have to start having them. So this temporary relief may give way to even more difficult times.

I don't want to think too hard about any of that right now though. I really really need companionship of some kind though. I need it very much.

Maybe a dog will do ... ? This might start hurting a lot more these days. Shoot ...

My interview with EFY was today! I very nearly didn't go to it, but I did in the end and I am ever so happy that I did. I told them that I am openly gay. Never thought that I would do that, but I did. And it felt great. And the interview was both inspiring and uplifting. All good things!

Tomorrow has got to be Temple day. Good things coming!

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Friday, February 9, 2018

Man.

Coming out has been exhausting! But I did it, and it's done, and I am super happy about it.

I got a lot of news from tons of people, all saying lovely things — as it turns out I know quite a few gay

people. And lots of them came out to me today!

So, man, it was quite the day.

It's a bit surreal to be doing this and having these conversations with all these people. It is very strange.

But good.

[One of my best friends] just texted me to say that he supports me and that nothing has changed. Man that guy is so awesome! He is an extremely high quality friend.

I'm getting used to the idea of single life right now. It's actually quite cool having no possibility of being bishop or stake president, or things like that. Those spots are reserved for heterosexuals, which frees me up to do much cooler things. Well what feels like is much cooler at least.

Time to glory in the mystery!!

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Tuesday, February 13, 2018

I had the *coolest* and most exciting experience today with [an old friend].

He called and I went over to his house to chat. I was expecting him to just want to have a chat with me about my post and about my future.

BUT he, as it turns out, is ALSO GAY! I am so stoked about this! He and I are brothers—meant to be good friends! I think that God most definitely has a wonderful plan for all of us. MAN I am thrilled about what is coming ahead for me! I am absolutely thrilled!

I'm just, for whatever reason, *so* excited about this. When he told me, I just smiled and we hugged. We are now brothers. And both very much in this together. How thrilling!

I'm just so grateful for all that is going on in my life right now. So many good things are going in a *very* good direction. We NEED to be talking in this wonderful church of ours!

And man. I am so thrilled that I have the people at my side that I do. So. Thrilled.

I am going to start posting more and more about my experiences and about my life.

I am so optimistic right now! SO optimistic! And just thrilled!

I am not alone, for once, and I have brothers in the church who have my back and who are completely on

my side. I'm just so excited about this!

God has the path for me set out. I am *so* grateful for it! How exciting!!

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Sunday, June 24, 2018

Church was so good today. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is just so good and so real in my life. I never want to leave it behind.

I need to move forward with faith. And I need to march forward to the beat of the drum that I feel inspired to beat.

This week I want to talk to both of my brothers. I need their input and their advice on what I'm doing. I just could never move forward if I didn't feel, at least in some small measure, that what I'm doing is right.

But one thing is for sure: this need will persist, whether I like it or not. I need to find some way to satisfy it if I do not want to be driven to suicide. I [am quite certain I will have] a beautiful, happy life. So suicide is clearly not an option for me.

But something long-term genuinely could be. How could people like me survive, and *thrive*, before? I guess in many cases they did not.

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Monday, June 24, 2018

Big day of transition. Of choice. Of moving, rather than standing still. I am so grateful that I came out when I did. That I waited.

So grateful.

I am feeling much healthier. I am even starting to feel able to make positive changes in my life.

This is such a fascinating experience that I get to live through! What an unexpected turn of events in my life, my family — in everything! So fascinated by it and so grateful for it. So beautifully grateful for my experiences and what they teach me.

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Tuesday, June 25, 2018

I am hurting. It's time to stop thinking and start acting. I need to move forward with my journey, and do so quickly. Well. All in good time.

I am hurting. I need a partner. I am hurting.

Time to sleep ...

MAN THIS HURTS. I am at the last leg of my emotional endurance (as it feels). I am definitely going to move forward in this direction.

This is a part of my life. I have to embrace it. Love it. And happily move forward. I can't wait to do so.

This is hard.

I am hurting. So bad.

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Tuesday, June 25, 2018

I am afraid to be alone tonight. I am terrified. I've tried to call some friends and family but no one has picked up so far, so I decided to come inside and write to try to calm myself down.

I went to an Affirmation meeting today in Provo. There's a house down by the temple where they have LGBTQ+ affirming activities on a weekly basis. I went to one today, and I can't quite say why but it's sent me into a deep crisis mode that I have never experienced before.

It feels like I am on a sinking ship, and that for a minute I found what I thought was a piece of solid ground to jump onto, but when I tried it crumbled under my feet. I feel impulsive and somehow dangerous; images of sharp objects are flashing through my head. I've been here before, but not this badly. I have imagined before what it would feel like to have a bullet in my head. I am in such acute pain that I cannot predict what I will do. I can feel a wildly impulsive side of me threatening to overwhelm me and send me into complete hysteria and delirium.

[Note: Someone called and talked me down. I later went to therapy and had a detailed plan for if I ever got to this point again.]

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Wednesday, June 26, 2018

Hurting a *lot* less today than I was before. Still not in a fantastic place. There must be a better way to live than this.

Talked to [a family member] today about the need for community. And stability. I realized today how phenomenally awesome it will be to go on dates — like to a movie — with another guy. I'm *really* excited about that.

I feel strongly that I have to be gay and go forward, embracing all of it.

All of it.

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Thursday, June 27, 2018

It has become self-evidently clear to me that my gay-ness is not sinful, and nor is gay marriage.

I also feel a voice bubbling up inside me. AND I FEEL MENTAL HEALTH COMING MY WAY.

I FEEL FOR THE FIRST TIME IN MORE THAN THREE YEARS THAT *HEALTH* IS COMING MY WAY!

And with health, energy, strength, drive, joy, motivation, goals — all of that!

This is self-evidently the correct way for me to go in! And I can't even describe how *happy* that makes me. I am just beyond words for this. If the direction I am heading in goes in the way I expect it to, then I WILL BE FREE from this three year stint of depression, of unhealth — of all of that unpleasantness. Now the question is: how do I share this with my fellow members of the church? I NEED TO BRING MY VOICE *OUT*! I NEED TO SPEAK TO THE STRAIGHT MEMBERSHIP OF THE CHURCH — AS WELL AS THE GAY — to share this self-evident truth! It is indeed, immediately self-evident to me. And that just *thrills* me!

I need to write a [something] to get my voice out to people around me. I am so excited — speechless — about this. We *need* to move forward with this! And we *need* to embrace what comes naturally. THIS IS THE NATURAL WAY!

THESE ARE MY NATURAL AFFECTIONS! And I imagine that there is some absolutely beautiful theology that will rise from this transition.

Beautiful!

I need to write [something about the gay Christian life.]

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Tuesday, July 3, 2018

I had a very good chat with mom and dad today. A very good chat. I need to be comfortable with being excommunicated from the church.

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Saturday, July 7, 2018

I have been hurting badly from depression in the past, which I think was a good thing. It drove me into places I did not know that I could go.

Anti-depressants really work. Woah. Now that I am medicated for depression I think I might be able to be disciplined again. Hooray!

Tomorrow I teach Priesthood. Awesome.

I need stability; I'm just not hurting quite as bad. Cool.

I just *love* this journey.

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Sunday, July 8, 2018

Great, beautiful Sabbath Day today. I am very happy and satisfied with today. I taught the priesthood lesson today and I *loved* it. [I felt] guided by the Holy Ghost, which makes me feel grateful, and humbled.

My EQP came over today to hear about my experience in the church. I'm so grateful to have such fantastic people in my life. So grateful for that.

My lesson today was on stories, and my biggest takeaway was that I need to surrender my story of myself

— of how I would live my life to — to the Lord. Completely give it to Him. I need to let the Lord write my story — to sacrifice my own at His feet.

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Monday, July 9, 2018

I need to let the Lord write my story — sacrifice my own at His feet. Anti-depressants rock! So stoked that I don't feel so deeply sad in waves like I have in the past.

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Monday, Jan 7, 2018

Wow, God is slowly breathing life back into me and it is just a glory to watch and to enjoy. To feel myself growing and coming back to life, light and love!

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This may be tough but it'll be doable. Excited for it. So grateful for the life and light in my life compared to last year ... *so* grateful for that!

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Tuesday, January 22, 2019

Sigh. Today was rough. My first date ever — with a man, at least. It was a first, and as firsts often do, it sucked. Ha. I just don't see how I will be able to overcome these barriers. It was a lot for one day, and I need to sleep on it.

I am feeling a bit overwhelmed and uncomfortable. Something, with time, will hopefully improve.

This dating world is intense, something that is tough for me to be a part of. The thing that is so tough for me is that it feels so socially taboo to be doing this. I presume that it won't feel so much that way when I'm in Cambridge but at least for now, I need to work slowly but surely to understand this world and all of its intricacies.

The super nice thing is that now I don't have to be so convinced that my love life will be stagnant if I leave UT. In fact, I think it will likely improve when I'm in Europe! I would like to meet a good, gay Christian

who [conforms to very specific expectations I had at this time]. The people I'm meeting here are simply not [that way]! Ha. The guy from today, to be fair, [wasn't so far off as I'm making it seem]. And we have lots of shared interests. For whatever reason, there wasn't really a spark. For better or for worse.

Sigh. ... :/

Today was hard. That was not a comfortable step for me to make. Not comfortable at all! It was a bit painful. :(

The trick is to follow God's plan. That is the whole thing. The main thing.

And the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing.

God, please guide my feet!

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Sunday, Feb 3, 2019

Sundays are vitally important for me. They are beautiful and restorative. I am finding that the more I study the Bible in an in-depth way, the more I drift from mainstream Church consciousness. It is empowering to feel like you can read and think for yourself, that your connection with God is legitimate, it's powerful, and it will guide you. As I am making my own path through this I am genuinely excited! It feels liberating to detach yourself from an institution in particular. It feels so good.

It is indeed time for me to act, instead of sitting and thinking. The thinking was crucial and decisively useful. Now I must act as I walk forward. *This* is where the fun begins! I'm so thrilled. I feel freer and more prepared for life than I think I have ever felt. I think I've developed enough mentally that I can confidently move forward. Exciting!

Today I finished my personal essays! I'm going to be ready for Saturday, the one-year mark! I can't wait to share it with as many people as I possibly can! *So* excited! My pictures I had done for this are so exactly what I wanted. All the good feelings here :)

All very exciting!

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Sunday, Feb 10, 2019

Man, the really positive feedback [from yesterday's post] really continued today in the best way. [My aunt]

called me up specifically to say how much she loved the essays.

Several friends messaged and texted, it's been so good! So, so good. I just can't believe how many people took the time to read the essays. What a privilege for me!

I just have *such* good friends, and so many good, good people in my life. I feel, definitely, like I am on a road that God has paved for me. I'm so grateful for that!

The key is to ask questions. Good questions! It's all about asking good questions!

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Monday, Feb 11, 2019

Man, posting stuff like that is so tough to healthily deal with. There's just so much emotional intensity that comes rushing in and I find it hard to deal with.

This is all just a ton of hard work! It is so much. Maybe even a bit too much.

With God, everything is possible.

Meeting up with [boy I was talking to on Tinder] was so good for me. I learned a lot and have better expectations moving forward.

Now that is the main question: how do I move forward? I hate *so* much how slow the Church is moving on this issue of sex and gender.

Alas, life moves on.

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Tuesday, Feb 12, 2019

I'm anxious for my dating life to take off and I'm trying to figure out a good way for me to meet gay men that I have things in common with. The kinds of men that I would be attracted to. [I have friends that] will help me through this, and I am *so* grateful for that.

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Friday, Feb 15, 2019

Today someone called my smile “cute” and “contagious.” A boy! On Tinder. That is the first time someone has flirted with me (a boy) and I don’t quite know what to do with it. Step by step. This will ALL pay off. I don’t know what I would do without [one particular friend] helping me literally every step of the way. Thank God for [her]. I genuinely believe that He sent her into my life.

[What actually happened: I lost my cool, unmatched the guy, and this friend came and had lunch with me to calm me down.]

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Tuesday, Feb 19, 2019

I need to set dating goals. I think. I don’t know what is right. Except ... I do! I need to keep transitioning. I need to *walk*.

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Saturday, Feb 23, 2019

I just got a fascinating text from [my friend]—what does the Restored Church do for me that other branches of Christianity simply can’t do? Why stay?

First of all, I feel no particular obligation to this church. I think that deep down I do, culturally etc, but right now not because of loyalty to any church teaching, dogma, or belief. Right now I can’t say why except for habit, community, familiarity, and because I feel God and Jesus close to me there. Changing churches would cause a big culture shift that I would (I think) have a really hard time with. I don’t know.

[My friend] and I had a chat today about church and temple and stuff. About my covenants and God’s commandments. It gave me a lot to think about. I *really* feels like the only way for me forward is out. Is to reverse my temple covenants (stop wearing garments) and change my lifestyle. That feels like the only really viable way forward. I don’t see how I could possibly move forward and stay compatible with the church, as it is currently run. I just don’t see a visible future there for me.

This is something to pray and fast for.

I would like to stop wearing my garments but I’m not sure if that’s the right path forward for me. We’ll see.

Time to pray.

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Sunday, Feb 24, 2019

[My friend and I] had a great talk about garments, which was so good for me to have. [My friend] cried for the pain of it all. That was really tender. I wonder what my future holds.

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Monday, Feb 29, 2019

I don't feel like a clear path is before me. I want something clearer. And it feels to me like clarity will come little by little as I move [forward]. I hesitate to move.

[A friend's response to my essays] is poignantly applicable. He said that most of my essays focused on social norms and acceptance. I think that he's right. My conflict comes from social expectations. I think this is something that I should both address and understand as a quality of myself: it is very hard for me to go against what I believe to be correct. And lots of that has to do with social expectations that transform themselves into morality. I feel a strong need to obey social custom.

I need God's help to guide my life! I need clearer answers. And I think that I need to be more frank and honest in my prayers. More transparent. More real!

It is *so* hard for me to receive revelation when there's no context for it. Where it falls outside of what I see as possible answers. That's hard. Really really hard.

I need to conform my will to God's.

So I need to seek answers more honestly. And be willing to act a little more freely!! That is the tough part!

Finding peace in counterintuitive paths.

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Wednesday, Feb 27, 2019

[My friend] came over to chat today. It was *so* refreshing to chat with him and be totally real. I'm sick of not being real [with people] religiously. I owe it to myself and to everyone that I know to be totally real. I owe it to my family and my parents.

I will be honest and say that I hope it's time to stop wearing garments. That is sad, terrifying, and exciting for me. It would lift an (admittedly small) burden off of my shoulders. I don't know if it is time or not but one thing is true: I need to be sincere, open, honest. I can't just not do anything. I need to get real, to wrestle, and to really engage people around me in the wrestle.

So. Garments.

What to do with those?

I need to go at my own pace.

I want to talk with more people.

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Friday, March 1, 2019

I really think it's right for me to take my garments off. I think that it's about time, too.

I need to meet more gay people. I need to get over myself and my stupid prejudices. I need to just be happy to meet other people who, like me, are gay. I need to find and date people. It is *high time* for me to do that.

And that just might involve a move sooner than I expected. I'd rather not, I think, but it might just be time.

God will guide my steps.

And I can trust Him, every step of the way. This is, without a doubt, the correct way for me to go. It's time for me to make my move.

God, please guide my steps. Please give me courage and strength, bless me with deep love and connection with a beautiful, good, and wonderful man who inspires me to be better, to do better, to *become* better.

Bless me with a man that I can pray with, that I can serve Thee with, that I can strengthen my tie to Thee with.

Please help me, Oh Father, to not throw away precious things that I have now that I ought to keep. Keep me close to Thee, Father.

Father help me to stop judging, rejecting, and hating my brothers and sisters. Help me to lose my obsession for social norms and find people that I can relate to. Help me find people to love and to trust, to come to Thee with in full purpose of heart.

Refine my actions to be those which I sincerely do to come unto Thee, and help me through times of difficulty and sorrow to rely on things that I have learned in the past. True things.

Help me, Father, to find love. True, full, wonderful, *divine* love.

...

Saturday, March 2, 2019

Man, how life is changing quickly and unexpectedly. I feel like Nephi killing Laban — it's tough to tell exactly what is going on, how moral I'm being. But I'm trying, praying, studying.

Today I took my garments off.

I am mourning this step in my life.

...

Sunday, March 3, 2019

Today was incredible! Like woah! *SO* much heavenly communication from Church and from my good conversations with friends.

I went to church unsure of what to fast for and had this burst of inspiration during the sacrament to look for and apply for summer internships, etc. To *move*. To get out. To move forward!

That was my inspiration. And I parayed and dedicated my fast to that. Man. Life is on its way, and I'm *so* thrilled for that! I want to move and I hope to find something for that.

I had some profoundly important thoughts on authenticity today. I firmly believe it to be a fundamental tenet of Christianity—to be authentic. You can't come to Jesus if you can't be authentic. You *have* to come from *you*. You can't truly come from any other place but from where you *are*. So then, authenticity is *so core* and *so fundamental* to a truly Christian life.

The same is true in in relationships. You need room to be *authentically you*. Only then can you learn to grow alongside someone else. *Only then*.

These thoughts came to me suddenly during sacrament meeting and I jumped up to give my testimony on it. That was so rewarding.

IT FEELS SO GOOD TO BE TRULY AUTHENTIC!! I **MUST** BE TRULY AUTHENTIC! LIFE is too

short to live in any other way. I need to come to Jesus from a place of *authenticity*.

...

Saturday, March 26, 2019

Father God — help me, please, see what I need to do moving forward. Help me to move forward, seeking and finding deep, lasting, long-term connection with people in my life. My mission feels very relevant to the current days and I pray with my whole soul that Thou wilt help me to courageously walk this journey.

God, Thou art with me. Thou knowest me, Thou *seest* me! Thou seest me even though Thy Church does not. Help me to be seen, Father God! Give me power. Guide me in paths of wisdom and of love! Guide me in paths of knowledge! Lead me, Thou, to paths of wisdom and of truth and of understanding! Reveal the mysteries pertaining to me.

Guide my steps, oh God, as I thoughtfully take them!

...

Sunday, Mar 24, 2019

Ah. Church today was just lovely. I feel so wonderfully restored by going to church and I'm so grateful for my faith tradition.

My crucifix makes a collar line like my garments used to! Makes me just want to cry from joy. Now I have a neckline and symbol to play with [under my shirt]—just like before!

I matched with a Yale guy yesterday on Tinder who is I think in the process of leaving the church and I want to hear about his experience. I wish that I could get to know him in person—alas, he is in Connecticut right now so that's probably a no go. It is just *so* rare to find people who are of my faith tradition and experience. And I want to find more people like that and show them by example that there is a place for us if we are willing to just TALK. I want to hear about his experience. I want to get to know my people and this community that in many ways I represent and will be fighting to make a place for in this church for a long time.

I'm going to ask him about his experience in the church. I think it's totally worth being a part of, despite the dissonance. There are *treasures* to be found. MAN though. There is *so* much work to be done! I need to be an advocate, a voice, a strength to people like me. In particular, to help people not feel the mental-health-or-church kind of decision. I always hate to see people leave the church. No matter who it is.

This is my work.

...

Tuesday, March 26, 2019

I was driving home and talking with God tonight—since my marriage will be all about unity and not about kids I think it’s crucial for me to find a spouse with whom I can build true unity.

I need to find him but that means that I must leave Utah to seriously look.

God is good and He will help things move along [with the Yale boy] as they should. God will guide me to the right person.

...

Tuesday, April 1, 2019

On we go into the unknown. Into that terrifying yet exhilarating mist where demons lurk but where our destiny awaits.

For we are the music-makers and we are the dreamers of dreams¹. We cannot help but sail into the depth of destiny—of our very souls—in search of that subtle voice ever calling us onward.

On we go through the forests and the seas. Simultaneously certain and unsure that what we’ll find is, in fact, everything we were looking for.

...

Sunday, April 7, 2019

Woah! Today was just an outrageously wonderful day. I am elated and starstruck and giddy; I am just blown over with happy energy and I am *so* grateful.

Today [Yale boy] and I had our first (FaceTime) date! I twas so fantastically good! We had so much to talk about, and it was easy and it just flowed. It felt just *so* right and natural and wonderful. I am willing to pretty much do whatever needs to be done to see this relationship on its way.

[My friend] and I had incredible nights both last night and today. She effectively gave me a blessing—a

¹Arthur O’Shaughnessy “Ode”

prayer of faith—last night and we had a *really* raw experience praying together. I just completely opened up to the demons inside and let them out.

Tonight I gave her a blessing. I prayed at length beforehand, and then she did too, and the blessing was sublime. My being able to give it, full of priesthood power, confirmed to my heart and soul that the path I'm on is the right one.

Whatever this is, God has a path for me. He has a place for me. And that place is with a man. He has a path set out and we just need to walk it—together.

This afternoon I found myself praying for [Yale boy]. Like right away. Praying for us, that we would grow together and to God forever.

Man. What a sublimely beautiful weekend! I have not cried in this good way for a while.

God is confirming that the path I'm on is the right one for me to be on. This is the first time that He has done that! I think that God will introduce a marriage—an eternal one—into my life.

God. is. good!

...

Sunday, Aug 18, 2019

Today I did not take the sacrament. I believe that God has told me that it's time to stop taking the sacrament and fulfill that transition that I'm going through. The last piece missing in my life is my family. My spouse.

Deciding to not take the sacrament today was very painful. I could not sing the sacrament hymn because I was choked up and crying. It was time though. And coming up it will be time for me to modify my worship habits to complement this transition.

It is so hard for me to see my priesthood become null and void in the ward community and the institution. That is really tough. I hope that my priesthood stays valid in the eyes of God.

Man. All this is just so intense.

1 Homeless

I moved to Cambridge in October of 2019 in relatively poor mental and physical health. The mental and emotional cost of coming out and dealing with the philosophical and theological challenges of reconciling myself with God and with institutions of all kinds claiming to be His really took its toll on me. I did not feel like myself—I found it quite hard to meet people, to be friendly, to make community. I found myself resenting my PhD, the fact that I'd just moved, and the place that I was in.

I did slowly make friends, but it felt painstaking. At that point in my life, spending copious amounts of alone time was not good for me (in contrast with most other times of my life). I had been in Zurich during the previous summer working, and had a couple emotional breakdowns because I felt too isolated and alone. I was very much still going through a healing process from all the hell that was unleashed when I came out in Feb 2018.

One bright light, however, was that I started dating someone about a month after moving to Cambridge. We related to each other quite deeply from the start and I was happy to build most of my social life around his. He had a large network of friends and I found myself working most of the time that we didn't spend together, so I willfully overlooked the chance to make my own friends.

Then COVID hit and, as I lived alone, I found myself spending vast amounts of time alone in my flat. After this (now ex) boyfriend of mine and I broke up, I found myself in a foreign land with few real, close friends (thank God for the friends that I did have!).

I felt disconnected with the University because I resented my status as a student. I felt disconnected with a job in London I was working because I was only part time (they laid me off with COVID anyway).

I had been alternating going to church in London and Cambridge before COVID, and even when I was in Cambridge I often went to church in college rather than at the local ward. That meant that I neither felt connected to my college chapel (I thought of myself as the local heretic), nor did I feel connected to my local ward (again, the local heretic).

The transition that kicked off when I came out in 2018 has done a lot for me and affected me quite deeply. The word “transition” is right; my identity as a Christian has been in constant flux. This sense of flux has sometimes made it hard for me to relate positively to any institution at all—religious or professional.

I felt homeless. In a foreign land, rejected by my own people (the church), unable to connect with any other institution, in a deep sense of flux and unable to identify myself in a sufficiently concrete way to relate to and get involved with any institution, of any kind. I felt like a foreigner in my own country, a stranger in my own land.

I vastly underestimated how difficult and alarming it would feel to be rejected by the very people that I called (and still call!) *my people*. The institution that crafted my childhood and ties my family history and identity together explicitly rejects me. For all the talk that “there is a place for LGBTQ Latter-day Saints” and that “we need to listen to LGBTQ Latter-day Saints,” the words are vapid and totally disconnected from the actual actions of the institution.

I think this sense of homelessness was really exacerbated by all the lockdowns, which (now that lockdowns are over) I am really quite grateful for.

Jesus was homeless. Jesus was rejected by His people.

I think homelessness is an important part of the Christian journey. It’s certainly playing an important role in my own journey. I have had to make explicit choices to favor what I perceive to be the Voice of God in my life, rather than conforming with an institution that bears His name.

I don’t think it’s a coincidence that Jesus was homeless. I think that, in a person’s sincere journey, God will call each of us to paths that feel lonely, where we fight battles that are hard to share with others, or where we come in conflict with our family or church.

Jesus talks about this a lot. He talks about leaving father, mother, spouse—the people who are closest to us and to whom we might normally show extreme loyalty. The people whom it hurts the most to disappoint or misalign yourself with. He calls us to a path that only we can walk. A lonely path with only Jesus for company.

Jesus had no place to lay his head. Jesus was homeless. Jesus was rejected by His people. Why should we expect to live any differently?

While my example of homelessness is very visible and only true of a small minority, I suspect that most people have a journey that draws them into a sense of dissonance with their loved ones and things they never thought they’d have to depart from. A state of transition that challenges what used to be such a clear and easy worldview.

In many ways it felt like I had no choice but to walk that awful path of loneliness and homelessness, but now that time has elapsed I am so, so grateful that I did.

I continue to be homeless and I do not expect that to ever change. I relate more positively now to institutions, I feel more connected in church, and I have more friends. I’ve learned to feel secure in where and who I am, I feel settled into myself, and in many ways it feels like I’ve made a home with Jesus.

But I will always be homeless. Even if the Church radically changed its stance and welcomed me in with open arms, the path I’ve walked has forced me to relate to the world on my own terms. It can never be a

home in the way that it used to be, which is why

I will always be homeless.

And that gives me a strange sense of comfort, because Jesus—God Made Flesh—was homeless, too.

2 Moral Risks

One of the most terrifying things about this journey has been that I have been forced to reckon with morally ambiguous decisions. Before coming out, I don't remember many situations where I felt like I really didn't have any clue what was right and was wrong.

It wasn't until I was confronted with death itself—the darkest, most hellish force that I had ever encountered—that I started to think that the question of what I should do about being gay was not at all straightforward. It suddenly became clear that there was a serious problem with church dogma on what is right and wrong with regards to gays. I knew that because church dogma was sucking life out of me and driving me towards death. As I lived through it, I became quite sure that this could not be the path of God, as it gave death and not life.

It forced me for the first time in my life to take on my own shoulders the moral responsibility of *all of my actions*. I hadn't realized how much moral responsibility I was offloading to the institution of the church. Previously, in most morally grey areas I just deferred to what church leaders told me, and that resolved the problem for me. The idea that “you'll never go wrong following the prophet” let me not battle through moral decisions and just say that eventually I'll get it right if I just follow the institution of the church.

But when I came out and faced all the darkness that ensued, for the first time I had to actually commune with God and discover His will for me, acting without an institution to guide me. That was awful. It was so painful. It took all of my mental energies for years. It drove me into a depression and kept me there for quite a while.

I distinctly remember the General Conference right after I met Yale boy. I remember feeling extremely conflicted, that I was breaking ranks with the institution of the church, but that at the same time God seemed to be shouting at me to go in this new direction.

The story of Eve came clearly into my head.

As I read the story, she had to make a very difficult decision in the Garden but ultimately chose to have moral courage and do the thing that felt right, but simultaneously did not feel right.

There's a similar story with Nephi, when he cuts off Laban's head. He is stuck in a morally ambiguous place and has no recourse except God Himself to help him navigate the decision.

I don't remember a thing that was said during that Conference, but I do remember feeling the voice of God speak clearly to me and tell me that I had to learn to take moral risks. I had to learn to not be frozen by difficult moral decisions, but instead to make choices and learn from them.

And it hit me—of course! What is Jesus there for if not to free me to engage boldly with life and take moral risks as I figure out what the will of God is for me? What is an Atonement for, if not to give me space to err on my quest for unity with the Divine?

Since then, it's been a very difficult journey, but I have tried to be bold in my life decisions, constantly commune with God, and learn from my mistakes to walk the path He has for me better every day. I've made mistakes and gotten things wrong for sure—but that is okay. It's human. It's exactly what I'm here for! It's exactly why God died for me on the cross.

After intense deliberation on any particular decision (many of them outlined in the journal entries above), I would finally come to a choice and move forward as confidently as I could. While I spent many hours reflecting on whether my decision had been right or wrong, I had an assurance that Jesus had died for me and that these moral risks were part of a real life.

And thanks to my ability to take moral risks, I engage with God in a far more authentic way than I used to. I engage with the human experience in a much more authentic way. My sense of closeness with God has increased radically.

I feel so much more like a real human, because I actually have to make *all* of my own ethical decisions and the rightness or wrongness of them is only between me and God. That is, on the one hand, extremely daunting and a heavy load to bear. But on the other hand, it is one of my most valued features of my life.

3 Zion

I've thought a lot about what my marriage should look like. What would be different in a marriage between a man and a man, and a man and a woman? Are there gender-specific characteristics that a gay marriage loses? How should I conceptualize my own marriage? Do I lose anything if I try to think of my own marriage as "the same" as my straight friends' marriages?

Around the time of coming out I remember writing on some Facebook post of some kind that there was room for us (LGBTQ individuals) in Zion but the question is what does that look like? How do we integrate ourselves into society in a way that brings out our unique talents, gifts, and roles that we can play? Does my sexual orientation give me any special gifts? Or should I think of myself as equal to my straight friends in where my "role" should be?

I don't know the answer to any of these questions, but I am just as serious now as I was back then about exploring what roles I can play in the community that might come uniquely to me and my family, if I find myself married to or partnered with a man. The notion that I should assimilate and have all the same rights, privileges, and (most importantly) responsibilities as my straight friends does not jump out at me as tautological. My intuition is that I may lose something if I try to think of myself as the same as my straight friends.

Periodically I'll have a (male) friend tell me that they wish they were gay because women are hard to understand and deal with. It's always a joke—part of me laughs, another part rolls my eyes, and a small part of me wants to scold, "If only you knew the darkness I had to traverse." I often respond, sincerely, with an enthusiastic, "It's so great!" I love being gay. I wouldn't change it for the world. I love that I can relate deeply and romantically to members of my own sex. I love the dynamics of romance with other men. The inherent equality of partnerships. There is no social expectation of who kisses whom first, who is supposed to "make a move," who is supposed to pay for a date. None of that. As a person who detests games in romance and prefers to be totally transparent, being equal in all those ways with my prospective romantic partners is amazing.

The physical dynamics between two members of the same sex are also delightful, for similar reasons. I am often of similar stature and strength as my partner, so there is no obvious partner who takes physical initiative, nor is there an obvious partner who submits. The dynamic is a push and pull, a give and take, and ebb and flow. I can't tell you how much I love that.

Romance also incorporates many more of the aspects of me that I am most naturally inclined to use to connect with others. Stereotypically, men are more interested in abstract ideas and in certain types of physical leisure activities. I have found it easier to build a sense of real friendship and comradery with

my male romantic partners than female. I find that there is a greater overlap in our intellectual, social, and athletic hobbies than there ever was when I dated women. Both of us being men (often of the same socioeconomic background with similar cultural roots), I find that we often engage with the world in very similar ways, and that is really quite special. In a very real sense I can see myself in my partner, and him in me.

I often ponder about these aspects of male-male relationships, and what might be different there from male-female relationships. What can I learn about myself in a male-male relationship that I couldn't in a male-female? What can I learn about Jesus, about God, that I couldn't learn in a male-female relationship? And on the flip side, what do I miss out on?

Physical unity takes a different tone for male-male relationships than it does for male-female. Most obviously, there is no procreative aspect of male-male physical relationships. However, men have physical characteristics that make them able to take on the role of the penetrating or the penetrated partner. Preferences and practices vary widely among the gay community, but for some gay men this creates an added emotional dynamic to the relationship. It reinforces the push and pull, ebb and flow. Being the receiving partner is quite a bit more vulnerable of a position to be; having the choice, depending on the state of your relationship, to play either role adds an entirely different dynamic to a relationship than what you get most often in male-female relationships.

The thing that concerns me most of all in any relationship I've been a part of is a very real sense of unity between me and my prospective partner. I may be naive and have unrealistically high expectations, but I do believe that in a gay relationship the sense of unity between partners could be profound, and one of the most exciting and fulfilling experiences in life.

However, I am inclined to hold onto my possibly naive view of the kind of unity between partners one should strive for. Perhaps this is one of those unique, spiritual things that gay couples can explore. Unity. The most perfect sense of unity that you can achieve.

I've written before about how important, theologically, I think unity is. The fundamental goal of my life is to discover the will of God and unify myself with it. In the context of a partnership, my spirit aches to spend a lifetime on the journey of unity between me, my partner, and the Divine.

"Thee lift me and I'll lift thee, and we'll ascend together."

I wonder lots of things. I do believe that I'll eventually have kids in some capacity. I'd love to, more than I can say (...I think). I aspire to take that part of my Christian journey, of becoming a parent and of raising a child. My partner and I won't be able to take part in the Divine creative gift, creating life together, in the same way a (fertile) straight couple might. But that's okay. That is not a part of life I am meant to

experience. I mourn that quite often, but I accept it.

But I wonder most about how I can build Zion. A people of one heart and one mind. How can my marriage help to create this new Eden, where there is abundance, no poor or oppressed, where all people are one? Maybe these different perspectives and experiences on the unity of souls and partners in marriage will help me contribute to Zion in a way that only same-sex couples can.

I wonder.

I believe that God will guide me. He will guide my marriage. I have a deeply strong sense of purpose and meaning in my place in the Christian world, and I believe that my marriage will play a role there. I can't tell you what that will be, but I look forward to it.

4 Faith

Far and away the most important characteristic that I look for in a prospective partner is their faith. My faith is so deeply rooted to the man I am, the way that I see the world, and my day-to-day life that I cannot imagine having real intimacy with a partner if we do not have some common ground on faith. What exactly that “common ground” has to be is still an open question for me. In the Christian world, my Mormon roots are quite peculiar (read: provocative and even offensive). You won’t be surprised to know that I don’t find many gay Mormon boys in Cambridge. Many gays have been so traumatized by whatever Christian denomination they grew up with that they have developed an allergic reaction to it.

As anyone with Mormon roots who tries dating outside the Mormon world will know, I also don’t find gays who have even the remotest idea of what it’s like to grow up in Utah, serve a mission, or grow up a Mormon. I have yet to succeed in communicating even the one one-hundredth of what that means and how it has shaped me. Considering the utter depth to which my background has shaped and formed me, that it is undeniably a core part of who I am and how I relate to the world, you can imagine that it’s been like pulling teeth to relate to anyone on this level of my life.

God is good, though, and I always seem to find someone who has a faith I can relate to, at least at some level. Becoming homeless from my own faith tradition, I find myself in constant flux as to where I stand in relation to Christian institutions; however, I have a very stable, rooted notion of who God is, who I am, and how we relate, that stays with me and guides me. I think that is the most important part of my faith and what this “common ground” I’m looking for should look like.

My faith has evolved in such nuanced and dissonant ways since I came out that when I think about raising children my brain wants to explode. I have no idea how to structure a family faith narrative suitable for kids which is consistent on some level with the faith that I hold. I suppose I should solve one problem at a time—before I’d be willing to raise kids I need to find a way to relate to someone else on the level of my faith.

I have met few people in my life who relate to their faith in the “same” way that I do. That is probably true of everyone; we are all deeply peculiar and individual if you dig beneath the surface. I can’t decide if I need to work on being more relatable on a faith level or if I should stubbornly be my very particular and specific kind of self. I don’t know. Probably a little of both.

If I think about my dating life logically, I laugh and acknowledge that the chances of finding someone are virtually zero. I don’t mind though. I’m not desperate to find someone. I know God has a purpose, He has a plan, and this would be far from the first time that seemingly impossible barriers have dissolved into the wind. Instead of feeling hopeless or alone, I just smile and look forward to the great miracles ahead of me.

5 Doubt

I don't know that I can quite put my finger on why Christians have such an allergic reaction to the concept of doubt. It may be that faith is so valued, and a surface-level reading of faith is that its antithesis is doubt. Perhaps we read the stories of Jesus where healing seems to be predicated on belief and think that means that we have to simply believe, and cast out doubt.

In my mind it is more likely (and more unfortunately) a product of Christian institutions consolidating doctrine and dogma, keeping unity of belief among their membership. There is good reason, from an institutional standpoint, to do this. For one, the rigid structure of belief is easy to communicate, easy to standardize, and very good for people who are spiritually immature and need some sort of framework on which to build the ideas of faith (read: children and people new to the idea of faith).

My relationship with the concept of doubt has totally changed over the last few years. I don't believe that rigid dogma and a stigmatization of doubt is the way that God would have us live our whole lives. I believe it's a good framework to get started on, and I am grateful that I grew up and have at many times held very rigid, structured worldviews. But the more I live, the more I think that no single worldview can capture the essence of reality. No matter what you believe, I think that if you live long enough you will find good reasons to doubt your belief system.

My solution to this is pragmatic: It is first important to recognize that no matter what I believe, to some degree I am almost certainly wrong. Therefore, if presented with two contradictory worldviews (including but not limited to doctrines), it makes sense to hold the tension of contradiction and not feel pressured to immediately discard one or the other. Most likely there is truth in both worldviews and it is worthwhile to sit with both until you can see what is efficacious about each.

Another way to describe this approach is to adopt each worldview, one at a time, using it as a lens through which to see the world, and see what fruits come out of it. This is a method of obtaining knowledge based love. You embrace a person, a book, a worldview, a doctrine, a piece of philosophy; you love it, you try it on, you see how it looks, how it feels, what it's like to incorporate that into your being. Then you see what comes out of the other end of that process.

This is the method of knowledge that Jesus describes; it's actually quite general and can be used in all kinds of contexts. He invites us to live his teachings, adopt them, and see the fruits that emerge. While most people wouldn't identify this process as "the" process through which they gain knowledge, I would posit that it is actually the primary way that humans do so in practice.

To understand how something tastes, you actually taste it and incorporate it into your being. To understand a new genre of music, you might listen to it, tap your feet to it, get it stuck in your head, even dance to

it—only by incorporating it into your being like that do you actually understand what this music is. Even with science, the scientific method is fundamentally verifying whether something is true or not by lived experience (experiments). I could go on with examples.

On my journey of faith over the last four years I have been presented with and had to live with innumerable contradictions. Fundamentally, the contradiction of my faith and sexuality taught me how to live with two contradictory forces and somehow emerge on the other end with some sense of reconciliation. Both my faith and sexuality are part of me, both need to be affirmed and lived, and neither can do so at the expense of the other. This was quite the contradiction to wrestle with.

For the longest time I held off facing this fundamental contradiction of self because I was unable to stomach the idea of exploring my doubt. Over the years, I could feel God nudging me and encouraging me to look into the scary, dark doubts, seeing in the end that they were actually the road to light and life.

I have a specific memory of praying at my bedside. It was the first time in my life I dared even ask the question, “What if I can actually just be gay? Can I actually affirm this part of me? What if this constant effort of caging this part of me is not actually the path God has for me?” I asked the question in my prayer, and in the subsequent months God proceeded to prod me, bit by bit, to ask difficult and counterintuitive questions. It was only when I relaxed and let God finally shape my life, truly, that I was able to reconcile myself to my faith and sexuality simultaneously.

One of the many problems with stigmatizing, fearing, or shying away from doubt is that it does not allow God to talk to us fully. If there is a doctrinal line that we cannot cross, it may make it so that we can’t see the bigger picture and greater light that God has in store for us. It might stunt our growth.

For a lot of you (including me) this idea can be terrifying. It doesn’t feel good to have your whole worldview subject to question (and thus demolition) at any given time. God is good; I’m grateful that He has guided me gently along this journey of questions and doubt. In many ways it’s been a process of slowly facing and overcome fear.

God nudged me along—by way of my doubts—to where I am today. My faith has never felt so whole. *I* have never felt so whole. I have finally learned that there is substance to my faith and that I don’t have to worry about doubting it. It holds its own, I don’t need to shield it. Even more, doubt was the crucial ingredient to the faith I have and love so much today.

6 Death and Hell

I used to think that because Jesus conquered death, I would not have to descend to the depths of death and hell, as He did so in my place. I might have justified that with simple church rhetoric, or perhaps from verses like 1 Corinthians 15:55: “O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?” Going through what I’ve gone through over the last four years, I no longer believe this. I think a far more accurate way of reading Jesus’ suffering, death, and resurrection is that he shows us the way to life, by example, rather than by proxy.

One of the great beauties and paradoxes of the story of Jesus is that He transcends death *precisely by dying*. He overcomes suffering by accepting it willingly and without struggle. I do not believe that He did this so that we would not suffer; rather, I think that He did so to show us how we must also embrace suffering. Embrace the tragedy of life, dwell on it, descend into it willingly, and only then can we emerge transcendent through it on the other side. This is the divinity of humanity: we can transcend death and hell by following Jesus’ example straight through it.

This Christian death and resurrection cycle does not leave you unscarred. Jesus Himself bears the scars of salvation on His hands, side, and feet. And it most certainly does not leave you unchanged. Rather, great parts of you die and have to be reborn. It is like we reenact a baptism over and over again.

I think this is fundamental to the Christian journey. I believe that we should die, descend into hell, and then be resurrected, ascending into heaven, many times throughout our lives. Perhaps this should be the constant cycle of a Christian’s life; perhaps the baptism should be thought of as a pattern that marks the Christian life rather than a one-time event.

Death can take many forms. It can be a crippling illness, mental unhealth, the physical death of a loved one, the loss of a relationship, the crumbling of a career, failure, or the crumbling of a worldview. It is always painful, always a real struggle, and I don’t expect that it gets any easier over time.

Looking back on my last four years, so many parts of me have had to die. I still mourn the loss of those parts of me on a regular basis. I miss being in good standing with the church I was raised in; I miss aspiring to a traditional family and all the beauty that entails; I miss having a concrete worldview that made sense and worked for me; I miss not feeling homeless in the landscape of Christian institutions; I miss having a community of people that shared my faith. I still cry over all of these things, literally.

But Jesus showed us that through death and suffering we obtain life. That, I think, is core to His message. If you take suffering as axiomatic to the nature of life, perhaps even the default rather than the exception, the stories of the Old and New Testaments take on a new character. That, paradoxically, the darkness is the way to light. Death is the road to life. Doubt is the road to faith.

I am so grateful for the excruciating and humiliating death I've endured over the last few years (and even more grateful that it's over!). It has utterly transformed me. What I once believed to be my greatest spiritual weaknesses are now my greatest assets. I am a fundamentally new man. I relate to the world in an entirely different way and my life is *so much richer* because of it. It is a tragic road to have had to walk, but I am so much better for it. Looking back, I wouldn't trade it for anything.