

Why I Stay
by John Dehlin
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First, I want to acknowledge my three fellow panelists. Phil, Ronda and Carol Lynn – Thank you for your friendship and mentoring over the years. Your influence has meant more to me than you can know.

I also want to thank Toby, Mary Ellen, Steven, Michael, and everyone else at Sunstone for keeping this fabulously historic institution alive, and for all of you who are here supporting Sunstone this weekend.

I am deeply honored to be here today.

Before answering the question “Why I stay,” I think it would be most appropriate to first address the question, “Am I still here?”

My answer would be yes – with a few significant asterisks.

Before I list these asterisks, I want you to know that I haven’t drawn any final conclusions: instead, they represent how I am feeling today. I expect they could change tomorrow, or next year. I am learning to become more comfortable with having asterisks in my life and less comfortable with having definitive conclusions.

Asterisk #1: God. Throughout my Mormon adulthood, I have discovered that the Judeo-Christian/Mormon God that was taught to me in seminary--the God that requested Isaac’s sacrifice of Abraham as a test, and cursed Job for sport; the God that would send his Son to die, instead of facing the suffering Himself; the God that sent an angel with a flaming sword to Joseph; the God that blamed the *members* for the failures of Zion’s camp; the God whose divinely-led church still finds a way to either oppose or remain behind the times on any significant civil rights or social justice movement; the God who, instead, directs His church to build a multi-billion dollar commercial shopping mall over channeling the widow’s mite to the poor. I struggle to believe in this type of God.

To be fair – I was also taught that my Mormon God loves me as His child – and this teaching has been immensely comforting to me over the years -- but these Old Testament-God-like stories are troubling enough to me that I feel like I need to keep searching. I’m still hopeful that Mormonism can support the God of my dreams. I have seen plenty of glimpses.

Asterisk #2: The Book of Mormon. I remember when I was first taught, in my Katy Texas home ward Sunday school class, that the Book of Mormon is the keystone of our religion – and that the church falls if the Book of Mormon proves to be untrue.

After 11 years of reviewing the evidence surrounding the historicity of the Book of Mormon, I have decided that it is not constructive for me to approach it as a literal history

of ancient Americans. That is not where I find value or beauty in the book. For me, the inclusion of things like steel, horses, chariots, certain Isaiah passages, etc., along with the absence of things like jaguars, turkeys, chocolate, a locatable geography – not to mention all of the genetic, archaeological, anthropological, linguistic and geographical evidences (or lack of evidences) -- all of this, combined with what I have read about Joseph Smith's early history and the Book of Abraham, make it pretty hard for me to read the Book of Mormon as a literal translation of historical records.

Do I believe that the Book of Mormon contains important moral and spiritual truths? Absolutely. Inspired of God? I am hopeful. But a literal history? That is not how I choose to approach the text.

This asterisk is hard for me, because sometimes it makes me feel very different from those I worship with on Sundays – and I struggle to know what to do with these feelings. Can I belong to this church if I feel this way about the Book of Mormon, and am open about it with others? Am I still welcome? My guess is that the number of people like me in the church is growing, not shrinking – and I hope that this will not disqualify us from fellowship with the saints.

Asterisk 3: Only true church with exclusive authority.

I love this church. I deeply respect its leaders – mistakes and all. I even sustain them. But as long as we're sitting at less than ½ of 1% of the world's population (and shrinking as a global percentage...not growing), I've found that it is not constructive for me to view this church as God's only legitimate path for His children...and that I just happened to hit the celestial lottery by being born into it. Similarly, it is not constructive for me to think that OUR sacred ordinances are legitimate, while everyone else's sacred ordinances are invalid – or that a Catholic mother's prayer for her sick child somehow has ANY less power than a 19 year old young man from Provo who happens to hold the Melchizedek priesthood.

It just feels arrogant and naïve for me to believe this way. It is not how I choose to view the world. I see God's power everywhere – even amongst atheists and agnostics – and so, for me, there HAS to be a way of celebrating the unique contributions of Mormonism in God's big plan in a way that doesn't render non-LDS paths inferior.

So -- those are my asterisks. Now I'll briefly try to explain why I feel the need for such candor.

Over the years, many have said to me, "Come on John. Just play along. The church is good, even if it isn't true. Just keep quiet about the tough stuff. The ends justify the means."

My answer to them is this: if everyone were to have had my privileged upbringing as a white middle class straight believing Mormon male, then maybe I could sit silently. But not everybody has had this experience. I think of the many young gay and lesbian

members who have become spiritually exiled, or even committed suicide because they believed, very literally, in the teachings of good or otherwise well-intentioned men like Spencer W. Kimball or President Packer. Or the feminists who feel marginalized or shamed for wanting a career, for desiring more of a say in important church matters that impact them, or for simply wearing a sleeveless shirt. Or the many young couples who rushed into suboptimal marriages at the urging of their mission presidents and parents. Or the members of African and Native American ancestry who were taught their whole lives that their beautiful skin color was the result of a curse by God. Or of the increasing number of disaffected church members who harbor justified feelings of anger and betrayal because they did not have the opportunity to fully understand what they were committing to in the church BEFORE covenanting to consecrate all of their time, money and resources (their lives, basically) at the ages of 19 or 21 – and who, as a result, have been sorely mistreated by their loved ones, even though their disbelief and/or disaffection rests on understandable, and very legitimate ground.

Some people simply cannot stay in this church and remain healthy – and the pain that they experience, at our hand, after making such a difficult and often courageous decision to leave (most often out of integrity) – that pain that we inflict up on them is unacceptable.

And so I just can't stay quiet about the difficult aspects of Mormonism -- if it means writing all of these people off as necessary casualties for the cause. If a loving God is at the head of this church, then there has to be a way for Mormonism to generate less casualties in its wake. This is partly what Mormon Stories Podcast has been about – seeing if we can find a way to create less human casualties as a church.

So why *do* I stay?

I stay because I still consider myself to be a believer – in what...I'm not totally sure. But my heart and soul still impel me to believe in some higher purpose, or power. And when I listen really carefully, I still feel moved and inspired by the whisperings.

I stay because even when I don't always agree with what is being said across the pulpit -- I still feel spiritual nourishment when I attend Sunday church services, General Conference, or when I listen to Music and the Spoken Word -- if I'm open to feeling it, that is. There are spiritual truths in Mormonism that still ring true to me – as inexplicable as this may sound to my non-believing friends.

I stay because I believe that, when functioning at its best, this church is a splendidly beautiful thing to behold – blessing the lives of millions across the globe. Does it occasionally harm people – in some cases irreparably? Absolutely. But to me, the brilliance is also undeniable.

I stay because I believe that if this life has an “enemy,” the LDS church is not it. The elements that vex all of us so-called “liberals” in the church -- bias, political extremism, closed-mindedness, ignorance, ostracization, bigotry, abuse, backbiting, etc.-- exist pretty

much everywhere, including--and maybe especially--within more liberal institutions, and even within liberal podcasts and podcast communities. These frailties are inextricably tied to the human condition. To escape them, you not only have to jettison religion – but human interaction as well.

I stay because the church continually reminds and motivates me to try harder to be a good father, and a good husband. And I need these reminders.

I stay because many of the ordinances, covenants and commandments that I have participated in or observed, still have value and meaning to me.

I stay because I believe in what Jews and Catholics have already demonstrated – which is that major world religions can, eventually, adjust to accommodate varying shades of belief and disbelief, orthodoxy and heterodoxy. This is, in fact, how they survive. Consequently, I believe that it is now our turn, as Mormons, to figure out how to do this – how to save our culture...our heritage...and yes...our church. I believe that, in fact, we ARE doing this, and that the past few years, and the next several more, will go down in the Mormon history books as being particularly influential in helping to create more diverse spaces within the church. I believe that what could be called “Reform Mormonism” is already happening – but that it is happening within the church, instead of as a schism.

I stay because I believe that all Mormons are cafeteria Mormons – some are just more open about it, or aware of it, than are others. For me, having gone inactive for a time, and then coming back to the church on my own terms...as an outed semi-believer...was a crucial step in losing the anger that I once felt towards the church.

I stay because my parents, siblings, children, and most of my in-laws have chosen to remain in the church, in spite of my candor with them, and I want to be able to stay connected to them in this sacred, meaningful part of our lives.

I stay because I don't like my children having to sit alone during sacrament meeting, and because nothing better has come along for my family and me. Not yet, anyway.

I stay because of beautiful people with last names like Bushman, Bradshaw, Barlow, Pearson, Callister, Prince, Givens, Thurston, Haglund, Brooks, Reiss, Moorehead, Oman, Bowman, Barney, Wotherspoon, Clark, Archibald – and many, many others of you here tonight. Thoughtful, faithful Mormons are some of the most beautiful specimens of God's creation that I have ever beheld. I do not desire to part company with you.

I stay because, as Maxine Hanks and Don Bradley have shown us, we never quite know for sure what is around the next corner.

I stay because of the positive fruits of Mormonism that I regularly witness in the lives of everyday Mormons. Flaws acknowledged, my experience is that in general, Mormons

tend to be honest, sincere, hardworking, selfless people who are trying to do what's right – and this can make them really good neighbors and friends.

I stay because, even with as much room as the church still has to grow, I see it moving in the right direction: away from destructive doctrines and theology, towards historical candor. Even towards accepting, loving and embracing those of us who were once deemed enemies to the church. Yes the church is slow to change – but it *is* changing, arguably at a faster rate than it ever has before. And we should give credit where credit is due.

I stay because I do not want to throw away or forget the history, culture, heritage and identity that made me who I am. If you cut a tree down, and try to re-plant it--without its root system— it will not grow. It just dies. And just as a tree needs its root system to grow, I believe that many of us will grow best if we hang on to our heritage and history, our culture, our identity, our social and spiritual roots. Wholesale rejection of my Mormon heritage does not feel healthy – for me, anyway. For me it would feel like cutting off a limb.

I stay because I still love this church. As dysfunctional, as broken and as misguided as it behaves sometimes – **it is no more dysfunctional, broken or misguided than I am – if I'm being honest with myself.**

I stay because maintaining my membership increases my ability and influence to effect positive change within the church.

I stay because I can't imagine ever shedding my core Mormon identity, or leaving it behind. I am Mormon, to the bone, and always will be. As Joanna Brooks likes to say, it doesn't just wash off.

Finally, I stay as perhaps my last, great act of religious faith. I believe – in my heart – that this big, beautiful, and clumsy thing called Mormonism -- that we have loved for so long -- is somehow big enough and strong enough to withstand, welcome, and even embrace doubters, strugglers, and heretics like us--flaws and all.

I'll close by reading from 1 Corinthians 12: "The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" On the contrary, those parts of the body that *seem* to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable *we treat with special honor*. But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it."

In the end, I stay because Christ's invitation appears to be open and welcoming to all -- even to Mormons like us. Maybe even *especially* to Mormons like us. Thank you.