

Confessions of an Unworthy Daughter

By Rea Clark

“Do you remember when your mom used to say, ‘I’m always on your side?’ But then, as you grow older and make choices that don’t fit the life they planned for you, that support fades. Suddenly, you’re not worth defending anymore, and the love you thought was unconditional no longer feels that way.”

My cousin Zowie utters this statement so casually that I am shocked by its profoundness. A thought shared over a “catch-up” lunch at Jimmy John’s, her treat. Such a simple setting, yet such a profound thought that has stayed with me in the years since then, and that I will ponder for the rest of my life.

There’s a particular kind of silence that stretches between you and the people you love when you don’t want the same things they do. It’s not a silence of distance or anger; it’s the quiet guilt and disappointment that fill the space where connection once lived. Once you realize the gap between your heart and theirs, it’s already too wide to bridge.

I was raised in a church, a family, a world, where duty was sacred and actions had eternal consequences. Growing up a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), more commonly known as Mormon, there was always a script to follow, a life written out for you in a set of neatly folded commandments and practices. You get baptized, serve a mission, marry in the temple, raise children in righteousness, and attend church every week along the way.

All you had to do was follow LDS protocol, and you would receive blessings and eventually eternal life in Heaven. It was a map that showed you where you should be at every point, and it was assumed that you would follow it without question, “grasping tightly to The Iron Rod,” as Mormons like to say.

The Myth of the Iron Rod

I was told the world was dark,
that the rod was iron,
that it led to light
that the only safe path
was the one I never chose for myself.

I held it until my hands bled
until the iron turned to steam,
until I looked up and saw
no tree,
no fruit,
no joy
that wasn't manufactured
in a hymnbook factory.

Now I wander off-path,
barefoot,
free.

They say I'm lost.
But the air tastes like freedom.
And the silence, finally,

does not shame me.

The Kingdoms

Every religion has a stated, vague, and metaphorical goal. Because this goal must serve as the ultimate motivator and prize, it cannot be attained. Instead, it is expressed as an abstract idea which the members will enjoy once they have made it to the top of the pyramid. So what is the ultimate goal for Mormons? Nothing less than Godhood, achieved through a process of exaltation, where members grow to become like God, striving to be as perfect as him.

When the afterlife is reached, there are three kingdoms of Heaven, according to the church: the celestial kingdom, the terrestrial kingdom, and the telestial kingdom. The celestial kingdom is the highest of the three kingdoms of glory. This should be your goal: to inherit celestial glory and to help others receive that blessing as well. It results from a lifetime of righteousness and perseverance of purpose. The terrestrial kingdom includes members of the church who weren't living the teachings of the gospel. The telestial kingdom includes those who never had access to the gospel, and they are supposedly able to be taught in the afterlife and get a chance to choose the gospel and potentially move up.

Third Kingdom

Mormons say there are three heavens.

I believed in all of them

because my primary teacher cried

when she told us

we might not see our families
if we weren't good enough.

I couldn't let that happen.

I used to draw Celestial mansions
in colored pencil:
marble stairs,
gardens with roses that never wilted,
sparkly structures and heavenly angels.

But now I wonder
was that a promise
or a bribe?

Heaven,
eternal life,
sealed to your family forever.

All dazzling promises,
dangled in front of every member
baiting them into submission.

What if heaven's a lie

and I've spent my life
trying to earn a fiction?

Making Expectations Clear

The expectations of Mormons are implanted into your brain from the moment you are brought into this world. As a Mormon,, you don't own your thoughts, your actions, how you dress, how you eat, or your time.

In primary, ages 8-12, you sing songs such as "I Hope They Call Me On A Mission," "I Love to See the Temple," "I Will Walk With Jesus," and "Quickly I'll Obey." You are told what you want and what you enjoy through songs and teachings like these.

You idolize the temple without even understanding its function. You love it because you are told to love it, because the adults around you are overjoyed when you say you do. You absorb it: the temple is good, the temple is holy, the temple is God's house on Earth. So you draw it in crayon, participate in the activities, and repeat the lines back, proud and wide-eyed, thinking they are your own thoughts.

"I Love to See the Temple"

(From the LDS Children's Songbook) "Sung (*Thoughtfully*)"

I love to see the temple.

I'm going there someday

To feel the Holy Spirit,

To listen and to pray.
For the temple is a house of God,
A place of love and beauty.
I'll prepare myself while I am young;
This is my sacred duty.

I love to see the temple.
I'll go inside someday.
I'll cov'nant with my Father;
I'll promise to obey.
For the temple is a holy place
Where we are sealed together.
As a child of God, I've learned this truth:
A fam'ly is forever.

Before I completely removed myself from the church, I had countless moments, breakdowns, and panic attacks over the overwhelming weight of expectations. While I was a member, I understood the logic behind most of these regulations. They seemed rational since my family was convinced, and, according to the church, my rewards would be blessings, eternal life, and many more promises that bait members into submission.

My confusion was often due to my inability to get myself to want to do any of it. Scriptures were boring and usually made no sense, a mission seemed dreadful, and I didn't care about praying. I didn't care about any of it. All I cared about was avoiding the wrath of my mother and the hate I'd get from my family and other church members if I left. I also firmly

believed that since I was a minor and lived with her, my mother would continue to force me to go to church and push the gospel on me even if I expressed my disinterest.

A recurring dilemma for me was that of a mission. I remember one particular night crying, feeling so terrible about not wanting to serve one. I felt like a bad daughter and didn't understand how I couldn't get it to click for me. I looked to the scriptures, as the church tells you to do in moments of doubt, and opened to a random verse that said, "Feed my sheep," which means share the gospel in Mormon terminology. It made me feel obligated to serve a mission, and the pressure of it all intensified rapidly.

I started researching different options for myself to feel better about not wanting what was expected of me like it was an escape plan. I learned you don't have to serve one at the expected age of 19 for women and can wait even longer. I told myself I would just serve one later in life to make myself feel less guilty about my lack of desire, but I always knew it would never happen.

12:17 AM

I press my palms into my eyes,
as if I could push out the weight of expectation,
drain the pressure from my skull.

I do not want to go.

Not now

not yet

not ever

But still, the voices say:

You must.
You should.
You will.

I need to want it for myself.
I need to feel the call, not the command.
So why do they make me feel
like my no is a betrayal,
like my doubt is a disease
that needs to be prayed away?

12:19 AM

A verse finds me in the dark,
“Feed my sheep.”

and lands heavy in my chest

My breath catches.
Tears form, then fall.
Was that for me?

I have never had a sign before.
Never felt a push so direct,
like a heavenly hand on my back,
like a whisper I can’t tune out.
If this is a call,

why does it feel like a weight?

If this is my path,

why do my feet not want to move?

12:38 AM

Maybe the calling isn't a deadline.

Maybe faith isn't forced.

They said 19 like that was the only option,
like a door that would close behind me.

I let the pressure slip from my shoulders,

unclench my hands,

and breathe.

I am not saying no.

Although I know I want to.

I am not saying yes.

So for now

for all those who I'll disappoint

for all the expectations they have

I am saying

not yet.

But I know it will be never.

For years, I knew I didn't want to go on a mission. I didn't want to uproot my life at 19 and dedicate my whole purpose to the church. In the LDS church, you are expected to be willing to put the gospel before everything. Everything you do must "invite the spirit," including the media you consume, all your conversations, and overall just everything in your life. I am not the

type of person to live inauthentically. I wasn't going to become a missionary if it didn't feel right for me, which it never did.

“I hope they call me on a mission.”

(From the LDS Children's Songbook) “Sung (*With Commitment*)”

I hope they call me on a mission

When I have grown a foot or two.

I hope by then I will be ready

To teach and preach and work as missionaries do.

I hope that I can share the gospel

With those who want to know the truth.

I want to be a missionary

And serve and help the Lord while I am in my youth.

Biases & Control

When you're LDS, you have to trade in your morals and standards to fit the church's standards, so you are left not knowing what you truly stand for. It is like a subtle form of brainwashing disguised by catchy hymns and beautiful temples.

Like so many other things in the LDS church, it is about control. The Church cannot function without the members doing its work all the time. Shame, guilt, and fear are pretty much the only tools the Church has to make the members do its bidding. A few things in the Church are genuinely rewarding in and of themselves, like service work for community members, but a lot of it is tasks no one in their right mind wants to do, so shame, guilt, and fear are applied as motivation.

Striving to be perfect regarding the gospel cost me my real opinions and beliefs about the world. For instance, teachings with themes of sexism, homophobia, and misogyny were pushed onto me, even though, at my core, I didn't agree with any of these schools of thought. Never agreeing with these perspectives helped me realize the church wasn't for me.

Even after leaving the church, I often get waves of feeling like a huge slut for wearing immodest clothing, even when I am wearing a completely normal outfit. When I first started having sex, there were times when I would cry after because I felt so guilty. Mormons are against premarital sex to the point that just thinking about sex makes you feel like a whore. Everything I did, even after leaving, that didn't perfectly align with Mormon standards made me feel like I was stabbing God in the back, as if I was one of those who nailed his Son to the cross, even though I wasn't sure if I believed in him.

Shame, Guilt, and Hell

The shame I experienced due to my repeated inability to live in accordance with the gospel's standards significantly distorted my self-image. I felt unworthy to discuss the gospel or participate in its practices. This shame convinced me I would never be good enough for the church, even if I stayed in it and followed its regulations perfectly.

The church didn't seem to like me either. I've always been a smart-ass, too confident for my own good, extremely sarcastic and blunt, and I think the rules don't apply to me, which doesn't mesh well with organized religion. I outwardly questioned parts of the Gospel when most follow it blindly. At 13 I asked a genuine question in a church class, and my teacher, already having reservations about me, chucked a Bible at my face. I hated going to church and wasn't quiet about it. People loved me as a person but shamed me as a member. I had twice been told at church that I had the devil in me; they were completely serious. Everyone acted like they assumed I would fall down some terrible, drug-ridden, crime-infused, Satan-centered path.

This belief has created a barrier between me and the gospel, preventing me from fully experiencing its teachings and blessings. To this day, I am trapped in a cycle of shame and despair, convinced that I am fundamentally flawed and incapable of redemption within religion.

Mormon hell is said to be an eternity of guilt and shame, so what does that say about their practices on this earth? For me, being a member was a life of guilt and shame, which had already felt like an eternity before I had even finished middle school. There are so many people who live in a secret daily hell of shame and self-condemnation because every day they are internalizing the fear of a projected eternity of endless shame and condemnation from themselves, from God, and from others who will be eternally disappointed with them.

They pride themselves on the guilt pushed onto members; they say it's good and makes you better. It may motivate good change but at what cost? Why must I feel like a spawn of satan for wanting a tattoo or watching a rated R movie?

If only I had not worn that crop top.

If only I hadn't taken a sip of my friend's coffee.

If only I had kept going to church after I moved out.

If only I hadn't listened to explicit music.

If only I had not watched that rated-R movie.

If only I read scriptures every day.

If only if only if only.

Betrayal

I thought being Mormon wasn't very unusual. Mormons like to emphasize that they believe the same thing as Christians, just with an additional book. So I didn't see myself or my family much different than anyone else since so much of America is Christian.

Everything about them, every aspect of their lives, their thoughts their beliefs was dictated by their religion. This is understandable, but I just didn't fully grasp this until I started making small changes to my life and started moving in a different direction than what they wanted for me. They treated my rejection of the church as a rejection of them, like a crime against them as people.

The more I resisted the life they had planned for me, the more I felt I had to pitch myself to my family, prove to them I was still the same, good person even though I had left the church. The hardest part of it all was that I still loved my family. I loved them with a depth that pulled at my chest, and it hurt to know that my choices created a rift between us.

But the more I resisted the life planned for me, the more I realized that my guilt didn't have to mean I was doing something wrong. I wasn't dishonoring them by stepping away from

the path they laid out for me. I was simply honoring myself by recognizing that my journey was mine to choose.

The Garden Was Gated

I used to think the veil
was silk-thin between heaven and earth.

Now I think it's
just drywall
between who I was
and who I'm allowed to become.

They told me I was born
for exaltation
a queen in waiting,
a mother in the making,
a goddess someday
if I stayed obedient,
quiet,
modest,
worthy.

Myth: I am part of a glorious work.

I am one of God's children.

Truth: I can't even have sex,
drink coffee,
or pierce my nose
without feeling the guilt
in my head
telling me I'm a whore
seeing my life as sin
and my mother trying to pray for my salvation.

I no longer ask for forgiveness for wanting something else, something freer, something real. The same planted on me may still be a taste in my mouth but is no longer the blood that runs through me. I was not made for obedience or a heaven that is only reached through becoming someone I'm not. I was made to pave my own path, even if that leads to me being exiled and locked out of the garden, just like my ancestors with the apple. They say I'm lost. But I think this is the true resurrection, because the air tastes like freedom, and the silence, finally, does not shame me.