

My Faith Journey: Vulnerability and How I Hear Him Through Others

Okay first things first....If I pass out while delivering this talk, first, someone help me, and second, someone please get up here and read what I have to say. It took a lot of work and tears to write this.

Before I begin, I want to let you know I'm going to be real and vulnerable today. I'm going to let you in on something really painful to me, but that I've learned a lot from...I've held this process and journey closely to my heart. I've been cautious and protective about who I have shared it with up till this point. With time, I've healed a ton. It really was this perfect storm that all collided at just the right time to convince me to speak today. Maybe the fact that we're moving in 6 months, the fact that I've had time to heal and am confident with where I'm at, and the very surprisingly loving and accepting response I received from Brother [REDACTED] after I first tried to decline my invitation to speak. I hope that as I speak, you can hold a space for me. I believe there is value in listening to others' stories and journeys. Instead of a tug of war between who's right and who's wrong, trying to fit people into a perfectly molded box of what perfection or membership looks like, we can see each journey as beautiful and individual, where we can hold space for each other and appreciate and validate each person's unique life experiences. And we can realize that as we practice being more vulnerable with others, it will build deeper and more beautiful levels of understanding, empathy, connection, and love.

-As I dive in, Know that when I received this invitation to speak I was very open and honest with Brother [REDACTED] about where I'm at in my faith and what I would be including in my talk today if I spoke. I was planning on telling him no, but I underestimated just how validating, respectful, honest, loving, and appreciative he would be of my response. He expressed his utmost respect, told me I wasn't alone, and told me he believed what I had to say had value and that there would be people who would benefit. And though I feel like sharing this is equivalent to standing up here in my underwear, I am here today, sharing, to promote empathy and to provide comfort to those who might feel alone, and honestly, maybe to help me heal a little more and feel like I'm living and being authentic in all my relationships.

And as I prepared this, I found myself continually needing to ask, are the words that I'm speaking coming from my heart or are they words I think my audience wants to hear? I've tried really hard to be as authentic and true to myself as possible in writing this while being respectful to those here at the same time.

-Okay, So the topic the bishopric felt to ask me to speak on today is "How I Hear him."

That's a tall order for me. Because, currently I would define myself as a non-believing member. Just trying to figure out what relationship I want, or maybe don't want to keep with the church.... And because I want to be able to be real here, and let you know where I'm really at, I'd love to just take a second and read you part of my text response to Brother [REDACTED]. He really did surprise me....and then, once again, extended this invitation to speak.

So here it is: "Thank you Brother [REDACTED]. I sincerely appreciate your kind response. I've experienced a lot of that in this ward with people being able to create space for me and I truly appreciate it. The topic of how I hear him is a tricky one. My belief of God and Jesus is something that plagues me daily. What I mean by that is last year my whole belief system kind of came crashing down. I'm still kind of picking up the pieces and figuring out which ones to keep and which ones not to. I "Want" to keep those (meaning God and Jesus) and it's incredibly painful not knowing where I stand on those right now, but I'm giving myself the space and time to figure that out."

And if I'm being really real here. It's been incredibly emotionally draining and exhausting putting this talk together all week because, one thing I told Brother [REDACTED] I wanted to include, was telling you all a little about my faith journey. So today, here's a little bit of an outline of what you'll be hearing....what it felt like going through losing my belief system, the beauty that came from the ashes of it, and finally speaking to the given topic, How I Hear Him, and how the experiences I've shared today go with that, hand in hand.

HOW IT FELT

Instead of sharing how I got here, coming from being a firmly believing member on the path... I want to share what it felt like to go through the soul crushing experience of losing my faith. I feel it's important to say, I'm not going to share how I got here. That's really personal, and I don't want my lived experiences, things I haven't been able to reconcile, and the conclusions I've come to, to possibly be invalidated, written off through assumptions or speculation. Being tagged or categorized like cattle, put into categories like being a lazy learner or lax disciple, that I got deceived by anti-mormon literature or satan, never having a testimony, I didn't pray enough, wanting to sin, or was offended..... I'd like to be seen as a real person....

I'm instead going to focus on how it felt because I want people to know..... to know what those people who "left".... who are so easy to judge... might have gone through. I can't and won't speak for everyone's experiences, but I do KNOW that mine is similar to many...

So here goes.....I have never felt so low in my life. An inner burning pain, an anxious energy under my skin that never left. Days where it was hard to leave the couch, leave the house, or get out of bed, where all I wanted was to just ask the doctor or someone to just give me something to make it stop. Just to numb it.... because it felt like the Mount Everest of pain that I couldn't even fathom how to climb or how to get through. A space where at its worst, I felt terrifying thoughts that everyone in my life would be better off without me.

Because..... I didn't simply just lose my religious beliefs. From my birth, the church and its teachings have been integrated into every part of me. I also lost my beliefs of what life after death looks like, my surety of it, I lost my past choices---realizing that I had made a lifetime of decisions based on something I didn't believe anymore, and that I regretted some of those. I felt like I lost my community--nearly every person I had allowed to play a meaningful role in my life

was a member.....family, friends, leaders. I lost my way to parent, my way of life, and even who I was. (I like to call this lovely part the identity crisis that accompanies an LDS faith crisis).

Other big emotions I felt were betrayal and a loss of trust. Like I was only told half truths. But two of the biggest emotions I felt were loneliness and fear. Obviously a fear of death, but more than that, in those moments, mostly a fear of losing every single important person in my life, or permanently damaging those relationships. With friends who might not accept me, with family where I ruined a link in their forever family or became the empty chair in heaven, forever downgraded in their eyes, or with my spouse who could have believed it would be better to ditch me and get a different eternal companion to save his children from me and go to the celestial kingdom with.

It was a lot.....and like a dear friend of mine said, who is also going through quite the physical and emotional battle right now herself.....it was "the mostest".

I truly found myself going through the stages of grief....Shock and denial, pain and guilt, anger, depression but then..... as I began to heal, and moved into the stages of the upward turn, reconstruction, and acceptance and hope, I discovered the beauty in the experience....the beauty that came from the ashes, a process that forced me to reclaim my agency, pick up each piece of my identity and belief...and choose for myself if I wanted to keep it or toss it. And the value in that one thing alone, has made it all worth it to me.

One expression I hear a lot is that things wouldn't be as joyful if you didn't know the sadness. So let me at least spend a paragraph on the best parts of this process.

I think through the ashes, I've found beauty in rediscovering who I am. Who I am without the framework of the church, or the fear of God's judgement after death. To realize that there are still good things I want to do simply because I'm intrinsically motivated to do them and not because I'm motivated by a reward waiting in Heaven. I've learned that it's good to feel the pain. Good to let it touch my soul. Let it change me for the better. I've found the beauty in my relationship with my spouse. We've experienced incredible growth this last year--learned to be more patient, understanding, forgiving, and loving. We communicate better and are able to let those little arguments go so much faster. We've chosen each other. Learned to trust each other again. I've learned that spirituality is different from religiosity and that I can take the spiritual moments I've had and instead of using them to confirm the church is true, like I did in the past, use them to help me see the possibility that God might exist. And I've learned to appreciate other schools of thought so much more.

I've had an increased desire to take on a new level of ownership in how I parent, career paths, and simply just the direction of my life.... And I feel it in the more certainness of myself. A growth of confidence. An inner feeling. The peace that comes with being honest with myself.

I think one of the very greatest gifts coming out of this for me has been the deeper connections I've made through practicing being vulnerable. By sharing the pains of my heart with others it's allowed them to feel safe to share their inner struggles with me as well. It's helped me hear

more stories and learn to validate their experiences even though I might not understand them fully. Where I can be in their corner, their cheerleader, as they walk their own path through this crazy ride of life.

So now, part three.... How do I speak to the topic I was assigned, How I Hear him, coming from a current place of uncertain belief that he is even there.

As I said earlier, I still believe that Christ taught beautiful things.

In an excerpt from a talk by Dieter F. Ucktdorf he tells this story:

A story is told that during the bombing of a city in World War II, a large statue of Jesus Christ was severely damaged. When the townspeople found the statue among the rubble, they mourned because it had been a beloved symbol of their faith and of God's presence in their lives.

Experts were able to repair most of the statue, but its hands had been damaged so severely that they could not be restored. Some suggested that they hire a sculptor to make new hands, but others wanted to leave it as it was—a permanent reminder of the tragedy of war. Ultimately, the statue remained without hands. However, the people of the city added on the base of the statue of Jesus Christ a sign with these words: "You are my hands."

So to answer the question, How I Hear Him, I would say, "I Hear Him" through other's being his hands....living daily his teachings.

Jesus taught of love, he taught of comfort and mourning. He taught that people are most important. He taught of being merciful and kind and being slow to judge.

Many times over the last year, I have felt Christ's teachings in action through my believing member friends. I have felt sweet, unconditional, and beautiful love. They have let me cry, given me hugs, let me talk about my feelings and fears, and held and made space for me. They have let me know and proven to me that they value my experience, even if they don't understand or feel like they don't know how to help. I have felt their friendship and love. I love them too. They have continued to be my friend because they want to be my friend. And that's all I could ask for. Friends that see me for me, and love me for that. No strings attached. I feel like boundaries on both sides have been stated and beautifully respected which made these continued friendships possible.

I have also felt Christ's teachings in action with my no longer believing friends. I love them. When it says mourn with those that mourn and comfort those that stand in need of comfort, these women, in the most Christlike way I have ever seen, care for, empathize with, help, and love each other in ways I have never seen before. It has been a privilege, honestly to see. I will forever be grateful for the healing that happened by being able to talk with dear friends that live

far away, over Marco Polo, unfiltered, unashamed, unafraid.....to cry with them over our polos, and to fall into the tradition of ending our messages with “ I hope you’re having a good day, but if not, that’s okay”... because we had to say it so often... because we needed it when things were tough, and continue to be tough sometimes.

My purpose in sharing today was not to glamorize or dramatize this experience, but to build more empathy, understanding, and love. A faith community should be a place where we can go to help lift and carry each other through our hardest times. A place for support, and a place to grow together and become more Christlike people. Not a place to be afraid. I hope that some here today feel less alone, and others here feel a greater desire to hear and listen without judgement.

And lastly, a favorite youtube video of mine and my husband’s is called, “It’s not about the nail.” In this short comedic video, the wife is complaining about this relentless pressure in her head that won’t stop. The husband sees the problem right away. There’s a literal nail sticking out of her forehead. He tries to tell her, “you have a nail, right there, let me just take it out...” and she pushes back indignantly and says “you always try to fix things. Always. When all I need for you to do is just listen.” She goes on to describe the pain, and complain how all her sweaters have holes in them, and the husband just tries to smile and bear it. And when she’s done saying her peace, he finally says reluctantly, “I’m sorry. That must be so hard for you.” And then the wife finally lets her guard down, and says “thank you”.

It’s a good video, you should look it up.

My point is, sometimes it's easy for us to “think” we see the problem. The figurative nail in the other person’s head. We think to ourselves just how easy it would be to fix it. We think we know exactly how to make the other person’s life better. But really, all that person really needs... to help them heal, is to be told, “I’m sorry, that sounds really hard.” And then.....maybe the hardest part....for us to do is....we give them the space they need to fix it, in their own way, and in their own time, even if the end result isn’t exactly what we wanted for them.

I don’t know if I’ll continue trying to be a member and coming to church or not, or pursuing more friendships with church members when we leave. I don’t know if it’s my spiritual boat and honestly, some things about being here are really painful and there are some things I just really don’t like about the church. I assure you, going through this, never have my ideas of the requirements of my salvation been more important to me, but I would appreciate your respect in letting me continue to figure out my beliefs for myself. If I do choose to keep coming, know it’s only because I see believing members exhibiting Christlike, unconditional love and friendship in enough of a way that it helps me see a value in being here.

Thank you again to the bishopric for letting me speak today. I don’t feel comfortable speaking for Jesus, so I’ll just say these things are from the bottom of my heart, Amen.

