

Good morning. I appreciate the opportunity to speak to you all this morning. I spent a number of years as a Mormon or a Latter-day Saint, as members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints prefer to be known.

The LDS Church is among the few churches in this country that is currently experiencing significant growth, and Mormons have had a fairly high profile in recent years.



For a lot of people, when they hear the word Mormons, this is the picture that comes to mind: missionaries going door-to-door trying to interest people in learning about the Church.



To others, the face of Mormonism looks like this: Mitt Romney made LDS history by being the first really viable Mormon candidate for president.

POLYGAMISTS FOR ROMNEY



MORE FAMILY. MORE VALUES

And Mormonism also looks like this to many people, despite the fact that the Church has not practiced polygamy for more than a century. The polygamist groups that you often hear about in the news are actually fundamentalist sects that have split off from the main Church and that are not officially recognized by the Church.

For me though, the face of Mormonism looks somewhat different.



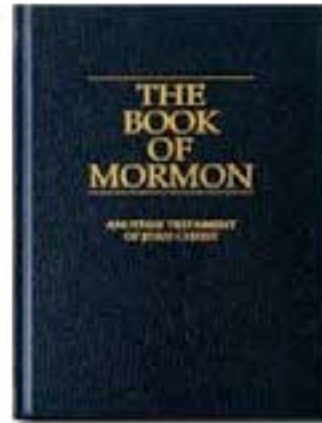
For me it looks like this. This is my daughter, Alisha, my son-in-law, Jeff, and my two grandchildren, Minnie and Ezra.

So what I want to do today is talk about what I have learned from the Mormons, both from my years as a member and through the relationship I have with my daughter.

I'll start with a short overview of the Mormon faith and the story of how I got involved in it. But for most of my talk I want to focus on some of the positive aspects of Mormonism, the things I value about how they live their lives. And then, I want to conclude with some thoughts on things I've learned about tolerance and respect for other viewpoints.



Joseph Smith



The Mormon religion originated in the 1820s in upstate New York. According to Mormon tradition, founder Joseph Smith had a vision at the age of 15, in which he was told not to join any of the many variations of Christianity that were present in the area at the time. He was also told that it was his mission to restore the church of Jesus Christ on earth.

Three years later he received another vision in which he was told about golden plates buried under a hill that told a history of the people of the Americas, and Christ's visit to the continent. Joseph subsequently dictated a translation of these golden plates, which became the Book of Mormon.



Nauvoo, Illinois

After founding the Church in 1830, Smith and his followers moved westward to escape the persecution they soon faced, first to Ohio and Missouri and finally to Nauvoo, Illinois, where they were able to build a community and live peacefully for a number of years. However, tensions eventually escalated here too and Joseph Smith was killed in 1844.

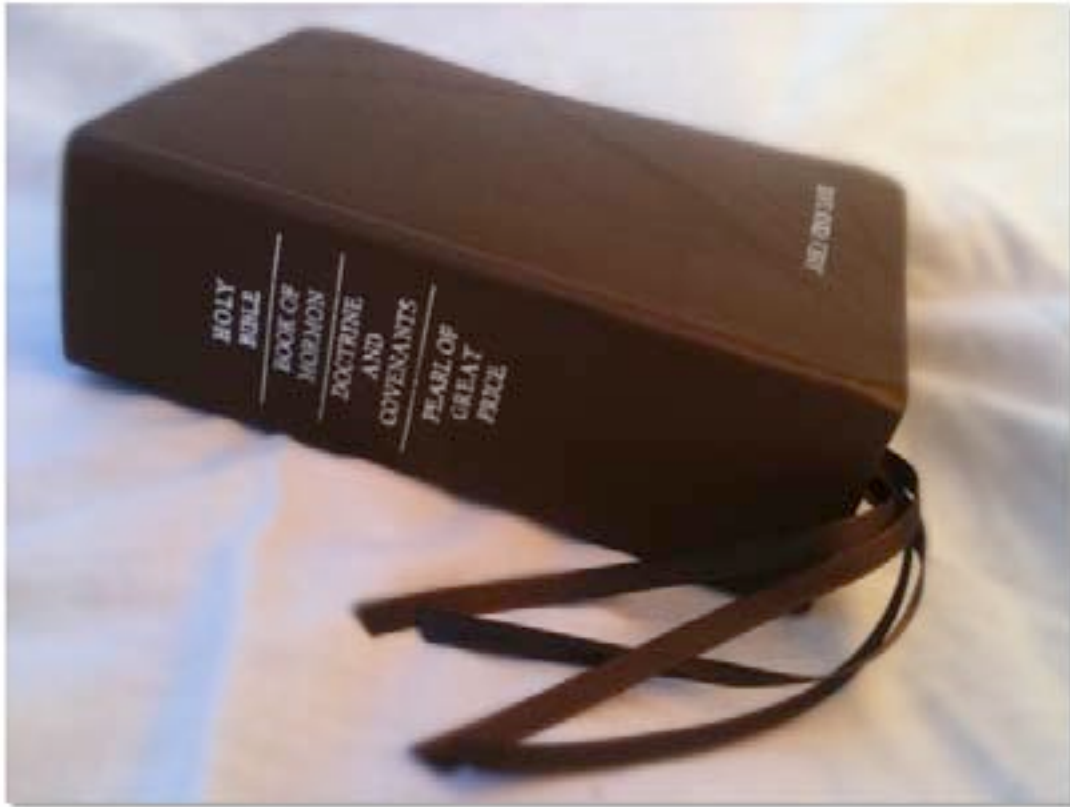


Brigham Young

After his death, the question of succession caused the group to split into several factions. Ultimately most Mormons accepted Brigham Young as the new President of the Church.

Brigham led his followers to the Great Salt Lake Valley in Utah, where they finally settled and established themselves permanently. In the decades following, Mormon converts from the US, Canada and Europe were encouraged to emigrate to Utah.

Today the Church has a membership of about 14 million people worldwide, with about 6 million of those living in the United States. Not surprisingly, Utah has the highest percentage of Mormons, with about 2/3 of the population belonging to the Church.



In terms of beliefs, Mormons identify as Christians. However they are not always accepted as such by other Christian groups because some of their beliefs about God and Jesus Christ differ somewhat from standard Christianity.

Their scriptures include the Bible, both Old and New Testament, the Book of Mormon, and two other books, The Doctrine and Covenants, which contains revelations from God, and The Pearl of Great Price, which includes the 13 Articles of Faith and several other writings.



The Church is headed by the President, who is considered a living prophet, and his two counselors. Below this is a quorum of twelve apostles from which the new president is usually chosen. At the local level the Church is organized somewhat like the Catholic Church. Each congregation is known as a ward and is headed by a bishop. These would be similar to parishes in the Catholic Church. Groups of wards are known stakes, similar to the Catholic diocese, and are led by a stake president.



In addition to the normal meeting-houses in which anyone is welcome, the Church also has temples, which are considered sacred houses of God and can only be entered by members in good standing. Temples are used for a number of sacred ceremonies including endowments, weddings, and family sealings, and also ceremonies carried out on behalf of the dead, such as baptism. This is the temple in Nauvoo Illinois, where Alisha and Jeff got married six years ago.



As I've already mentioned, one of the most recognized aspects of the Church is their missionary program. Missionaries work in pairs, and can be either single men or women, usually under the age of 25, or older retired couples. Missions are typically two years long and for the most part are funded either by the missionaries themselves or their families. Nearly 70,000 Mormons are serving missions at any given time.



Word of Wisdom

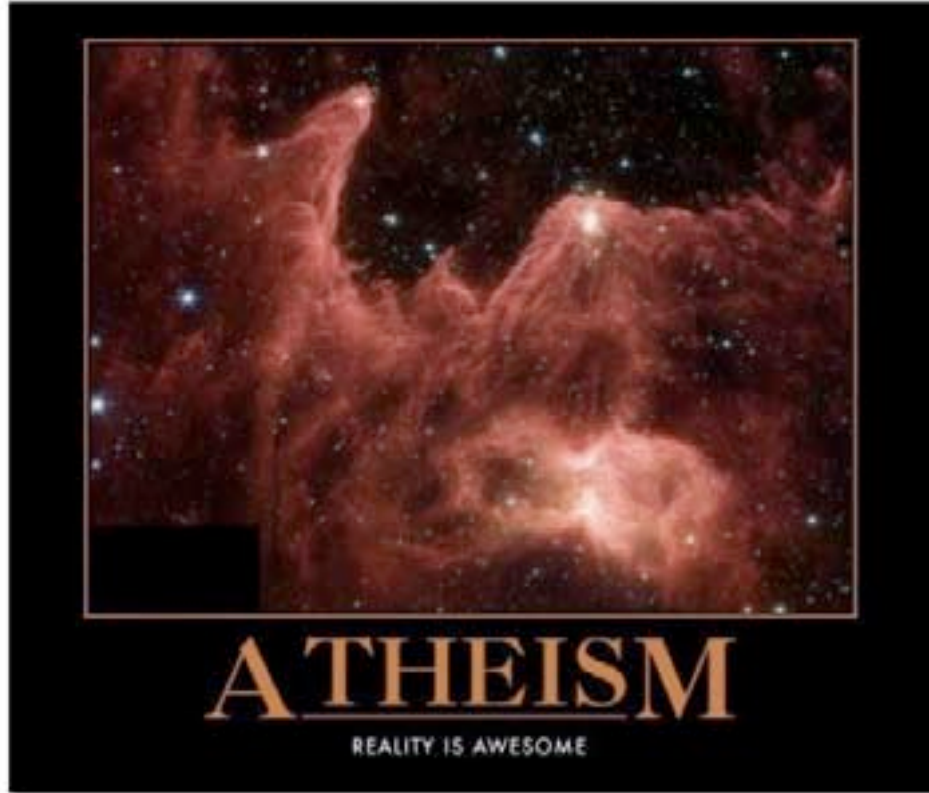


Mormons are also known for avoiding alcohol and tobacco, and even coffee and tea. This teaching is known as the Word of Wisdom and it also recommends eating lots of grains, fruits and vegetables, and cutting down on meat.



How did I get involved in all this?

So how did I get involved in all of this?



I was raised as an atheist by my parents. My dad, in particular, was quite outspoken about his beliefs. He always made a point of showing us how beautiful and amazing science was, and that you didn't need to invoke any kind of god or religion to be inspired by the world around us and how it worked.

I grew up though in a small town in Indiana and everybody I knew belonged to a church. The only other atheist I had ever heard of was Madalyn Murray O'Hair, who was the founder of American Atheists and a fairly outspoken and controversial person.



Madalyn Murray O'Hair

This is pretty much how I remember her: this crazy lady who was somehow associated with the things that my family believed. So there was a sense of isolation that came with having different beliefs from all of my friends.

But a bigger issue for me was the feeling that I was missing out on something. At the time I viewed atheism as believing in nothing, and I very much wanted to believe in something. I wanted some kind of meaning and purpose to my life.



I became acquainted with the Latter-Day Saints through my first husband, who was a Mormon. When I met him, in my last year of high school, I went to church with him a number of times and went through the discussions with the missionaries. I joined the Church shortly before he left on his mission to Japan and we got married not long after he returned.

What appealed to me about the Church when first I joined was both the sense of community that I felt when I attended, and also the emphasis on living up a higher moral standard, of striving to improve myself.

However, even during my early years as a member, when I was most active and involved, I remember always trying to feel something and believe something that seemed to come very naturally to others.

Trying to find a connection to God always felt forced and artificial to me. As my marriage deteriorated, I began distancing myself more and more from active participation and eventually I formally resigned my membership after my divorce.



Deed Before Creed

VS.

Deed Because of Creed

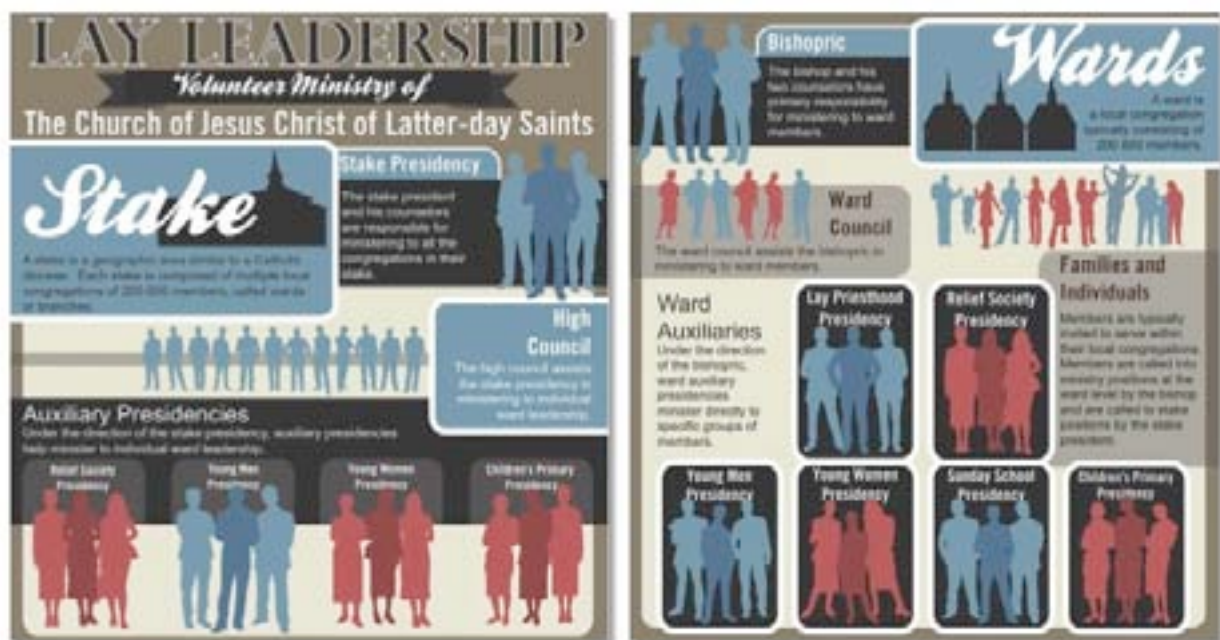


I don't really want to spend time talking about my opinions of specific doctrines that the Mormons hold. Obviously if I accepted their theology, I would still be a member. And there are certainly policies and positions held by the Church that I disagree with, their work against marriage equality being one obvious example.

However, I have always had a lot of respect for Mormon values and the commitment with which many Latter-Day Saints live their faith. Much of this commitment comes from the fact that, unlike other

Christian denominations, the Mormons believe that salvation is achieved not only by faith but also by works. Mormons are expected to actively follow the teachings of Jesus Christ and live their lives by the principles he taught.

So, much like we as ethical humanists seek to elicit the best in ourselves and others, Mormons also seek to improve themselves in order to obtain full salvation. So from this comes the title of my talk, comparing our 'deed before creed' with their 'deed because of creed'.



If I had to pick the one thing that I find most notable about the Latter-Day Saints, it would be the fact that the Church is essentially run entirely by unpaid volunteers. There are no paid clergy and all the positions that are needed to run things at the stake and ward levels are volunteer. People can be asked, or called, to serve in any of a number of different capacities.

These callings can range from being asked to run the nursery during Sunday services, to teaching one of the Sunday School programs or leading one of the youth groups, all the way up to serving as a ward bishop or stake president, which are positions that require a commitment of as much as 20-30 hours a week. Speakers for the Sunday sacrament meetings are also largely selected from among the members of a ward.

There are positions at the higher levels of the Church hierarchy, like the president and his counselors or other general authorities, which require full-time commitments and the people filling these positions are given living allowances if they need them. However, even in these cases, unless they are already retired, the people who are called to such positions typically sacrifice a lot of career possibilities if they accept.



One good example of this is that of being asked to serve as a mission president. The Church has somewhat more than 400 mission areas throughout the world. Mission presidents are the ones who oversee and work with the missionaries in these areas. They are normally asked to serve for a three-year period and this is a full-time job, for both a husband and wife. It's usually couples in their middle age, who are asked to serve, so these are people around my age, people who typically have jobs and families. So accepting this call means that they have to quit or somehow take a break from whatever job they have, and then after the three years are over they need to try to get back into the work force. Much of the time it also means moving the whole family to a different part of the world. So there's a lot of sacrifice involved for the whole family in taking on this calling.

HONEST JON

by J.D. Clark

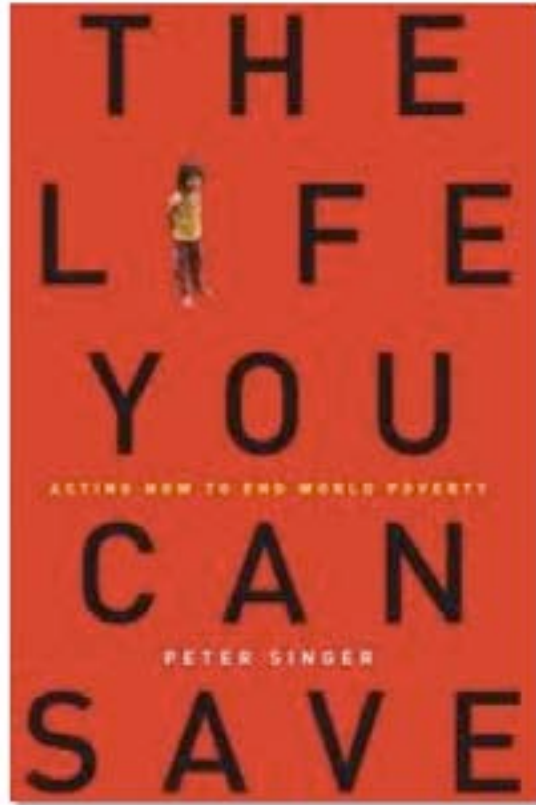


Accepting calls to serve in the Church is voluntary and is not a requirement to be a member in good standing and be able to go to the temple, but in practice few Mormons turn down the positions they are called to serve in. This is a level of commitment that I think you see in few other churches and I find it quite impressive that the Church is able to fill so many positions and keep everything running with just volunteers.



Another area in which I have been impressed with the Mormons' dedication to their beliefs has to do with tithing. Mormons are required to pay a 10% tithe to the Church. Most Mormons, including my daughter Alisha, will say that the tithe is not a burden because everything we have comes from God and He, in turn, is simply asking for 10% back to further the work of the Church. Tithing is seen as an indicator of commitment to the Church and gratitude for the blessings they have in their lives.

Putting the idea that everything we have comes from God into ethical humanism language, this translates into the following: In my life I was very fortunate to have been born into a middle-class Western lifestyle, to have essentially unlimited access to food, clean water, sanitation and health services, and to have the opportunity to pursue an education and a fulfilling career. I did nothing to deserve these privileges; I was simply lucky in where and when I was born.



I have talked here before about how this realization and my reading of Peter Singer's book 'The Life You Can Save' led me to take a pledge to give a specific portion of my income to help eradicate extreme poverty. About a year ago, after observing how my lifestyle really had not been affected significantly by this pledge, I started thinking about increasing my level of giving.

As a result of discussions with my daughter about how they view and manage their tithing, I decided that I would also try to give 10% of my income. So this is an example of how I have been directly inspired by Mormon values about tithing and have been able to use that principle and apply it in my life and according to my values.

Every person is important and unique

Every person deserves to be treated fairly and kindly

I can learn from everyone

I am part of this earth; I cherish it and all the life upon it

I learn from the world around me by using senses, mind, and feelings

I am a member of the world community, which depends on the cooperation of all people for peace and justice

I can learn from the past to build for the future

I am free to question

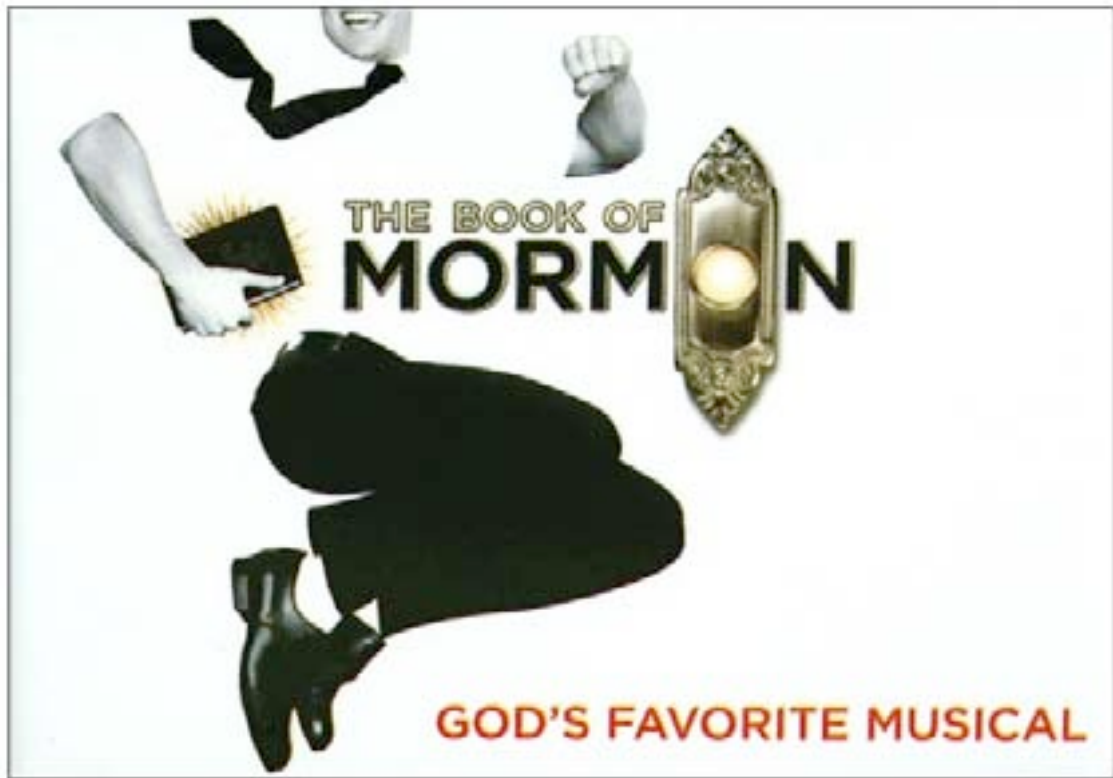
I am free to choose what I believe

I accept responsibility for my choices and actions

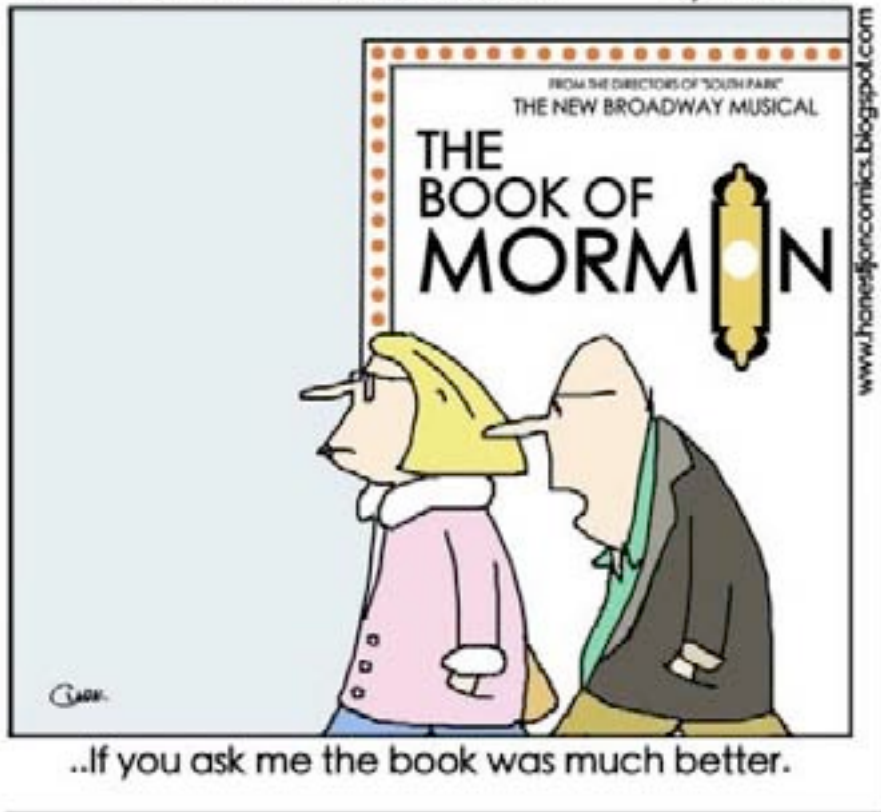
I strive to live my values

One of the Sunday School core values that particularly resonates with me is 'I can learn from everyone'. And that's why I deliberately chose in my talk today to look at the Latter-day Saints from the vantage point of their strengths and to focus on some of their values that have served as an inspiration to help me become a better person.

I generally have a good relationship with my Mormon daughter and son-in-law; we respect each other's beliefs and values and are able to discuss them thoughtfully. And although we get there in different ways, we share many beliefs with respect to what it means to live an ethical life.

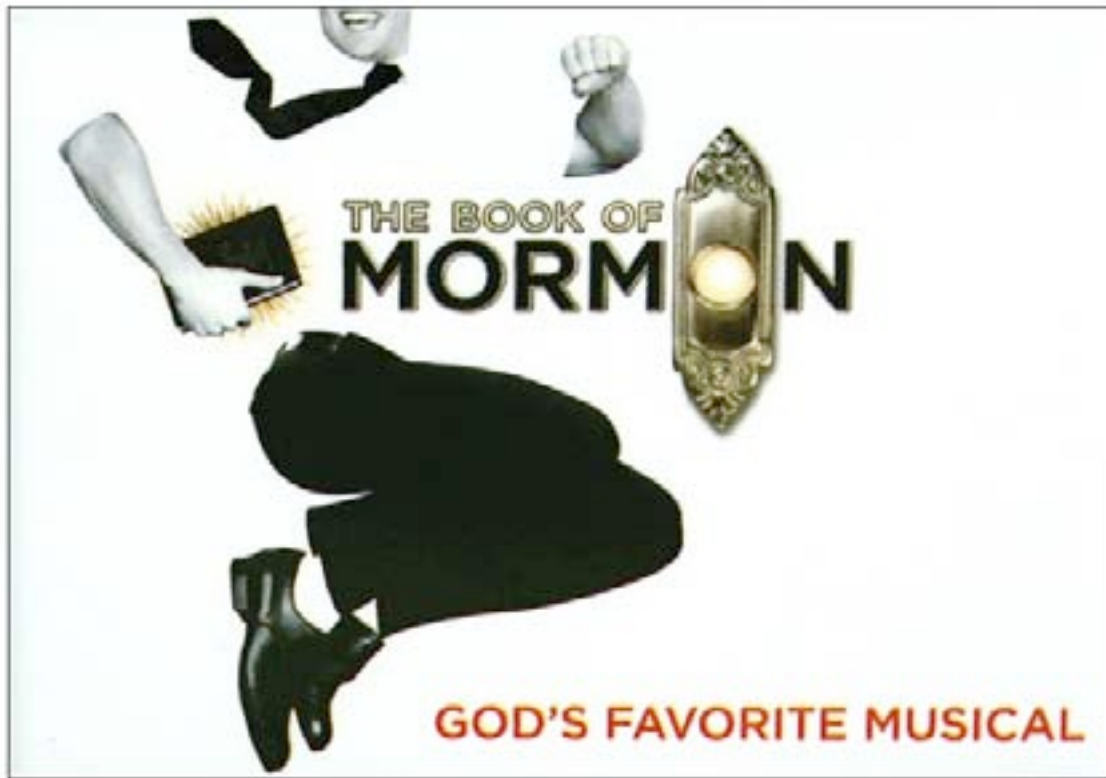


However, conflicts do come up occasionally and earlier this year our family had a discussion about the Book of Mormon musical that caused me to really reflect on what it means to respect and be open to other viewpoints.



The LDS Church has actually taken a very laidback approach to the musical and has largely used its success as a publicity opportunity for promoting the Book of Mormon, pretty much along the lines of this cartoon.

However, my personal experience with my daughter was a little different.



Back in January I had bought tickets to go see the musical. I hadn't mentioned this to Alisha, but at some point, independently, my sister and her husband posted on Facebook that they had seen and enjoyed the musical. The result of this was that Alisha sent an email to our family in which she brought up the fact that it made her uncomfortable to know that members of her family were willing to support something that openly mocked her beliefs. Her email caused me to question whether I should go to see the musical or not. I talked about it a lot with Amanda (who also had reservations after seeing her sister's email) and I even posed the question on our Ethical Society listserv.

Ultimately I decided not to go, for two principal reasons. One was a question that Andie Jackson brought up, namely how much was I willing to change my behavior out of respect for my daughter's feelings? I had sensed from the beginning that she wouldn't be

particularly happy to know that we were seeing the musical and, therefore, I had not mentioned it to her. However, I really had not expected her to feel as strongly about it as she did. Knowing how much it upset her, I became more and more uncomfortable with the idea of going.

The other reason had to do with a point that Alisha made in one of her emails. She wrote,

In this day of pluralism and tolerance, somehow making fun of Mormonism seems to be in vogue when certainly nobody would see a play mocking the lifestyle of the LGBT community or the Jews, for instance. You have wondered why there was not a greater outcry about the musical in the Mormon community. I would submit to you that it does not matter how much the Mormon community protests the mockery of our beliefs because those who are outside of the LDS church ignore those protests and support the musical anyway. Many groups who have been ridiculed on a large scale in America in the past have a significant body of people outside of their community who oppose that ridicule. The Mormons are not a popular minority and do not have that outside support.

Now, I have to admit I initially did not agree with the first part of Alisha's argument. There are many plays and movies in which various minority groups are made fun of, and in my mind the question of whether it was right or wrong depended a lot on the degree and type of ridicule: is it malicious and mean-spirited, or is it just good-natured fun?



When I work out on my treadmill, I will often watch a movie from Netflix. Around that time I happened to pick out this one: it's about a young gay man looking for a permanent relationship. Well, I got about 20 minutes into it before I couldn't take any more and turned it off.

The movie is supposed to be a comedy, but it not only wasn't funny, but it made me very uncomfortable. There was nothing mean-spirited about it, but the way in which the gay men were portrayed was so stereotyped and so 'over the top' that I just couldn't watch it.

And it occurred to me that everything I had read about the Book of Mormon musical indicated that it was going to be just as stereotyped and simplistic. Not necessarily malicious, but probably

so far from the reality of what I know Mormon missionaries are like that I wouldn't be comfortable watching it.

In this same chain of emails, in response to something my brother-in-law said, Alisha wrote,

I also support freedom of speech, but just because someone has the right to publicly demean someone else does not mean that they should be supported or praised for having done so. It makes *me* feel bad ... that the things that are most sacred to me are paraded and mocked on stage for millions of my fellow Americans—and family members—to pay to laugh at and ridicule.

Of course, we all enjoy jokes that in one way or another poke fun at some particular group of people. I don't think that there's necessarily anything wrong with that. The key is to know where the line is between what's harmless and what becomes hurtful. What this experience has given me is a greater awareness of how fluid that line can be, and how much it can depend on context and personal experience.

In the five years that I have been a member here at the Ethical Society it has become increasingly clear to me that our core value of 'I can learn from everyone' is something that is easy to say, but much harder to put into practice.



For those of us who are non-theistic, how often do we really listen to and consider what we can learn from Catholics or Protestants or Jews? For those of us who are socially and politically liberal, how often do we really listen to and try to understand the viewpoints of Republicans, or pro-life activists, or those who oppose universal health care, or any number of other issues about which we are passionate?

For the last part of my talk, I want to go back to the question of marriage equality, since this has been a very prominent issue in the last few years, and also because it's an area in which I do disagree with the Church's stand and so I've had to do my share of really trying to listen and understand.



The LDS Church several years ago gave extensive public and financial support to Proposition 8 in California, which would have recognized marriage as valid only between a man and a woman. They got a lot of negative publicity for this in the media, and rightly so in my opinion.

But in thinking about this issue and talking to my daughter and son-in-law, I found that if one looks at same-sex marriage through the lens of the Mormons' doctrinal beliefs, it is possible to see where they are coming from. The official Church position is the following:

The Church distinguishes between same-sex attraction and behavior. While maintaining that feelings and inclinations toward the same sex are not inherently sinful, engaging in homosexual behavior is in conflict with the doctrinal principle...that marriage between a man and a woman is essential to the Creator's plan for the eternal destiny of His children. Because the Church believes that the sacred powers of procreation are 'to be exercised only between a man and a woman lawfully wedded as husband and wife...any other sexual relations,

including those between persons of the same gender, undermine the divinely created institution of the family’.

Now, like probably most of you here today, I don’t agree with that way of looking at marriage. But the point is that I don’t need to agree with it in order to try to understand it and to understand why the Church is against same-sex marriage. Even if we disagree with someone’s ideas or beliefs, we can listen to and try to understand their viewpoint, as a first step to finding common ground. We can advocate for our ideas of what is right without putting down or ridiculing the ideas of others.

THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS

Love One Another: A Discussion on Same-Sex Attraction

Few topics are as emotionally charged or require more sensitivity than same-sex attraction. This complex matter touches on the things we care about most: our basic humanity, our relationship to family, our identity and potential as children of God, how we treat each other, and what it means to be disciples of Christ.

Where the Church stands:
The experience of same-sex attraction is a complex reality for many people. The attraction itself is not a sin, but acting on it is. Even though individuals do not choose to have such attractions, they do choose how to respond to them. With love and understanding, the Church reaches out to all God's children, including our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters.

A Collection of Conversations
This website is a collection of conversations: conversations with Church leaders, conversations with Church members who are attracted to people of the same sex, and conversations with the loved ones of gay spouses, children, or grandchildren who are dealing with the effects of same-sex attraction in their own lives. These conversations are not always easy to have. They deal with love and acceptance, sin and morality, aspirations and despair. Those who speak from the heart on this website do not necessarily represent in every word or detail the policies or positions of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, but all of them speak with authenticity because they reflect what has happened in their own lives and the experiences of those they love. The Church leaders featured here

What Needs to Change
Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Twelve Apostles

The LDS Church, to its credit, has since then backed off considerably from the same-sex marriage debate and is making a serious effort to reach out to the Mormon LGBT community, and to educate its

members. The Church has established an official website reaching out to homosexual Mormons and their families, and a statement on it says,

There is no change in the Church's position of what is morally right. But what is changing –and what needs to change – is to help Church members respond sensitively and thoughtfully when they encounter same-sex attraction in their own families, among other Church members, or elsewhere.

Individual Mormons are also working to improve relationships between the LGBT community and the Church.



Mitch Mayne

In doing some research on this, I ran across this guy. Mitch Mayne is an openly gay active Mormon, who is in a leadership position in a ward in San Francisco. Mitch writes a blog about various LGBT and LDS issues that I found very interesting. In his writings, he talks

about how he believes that it is his mission to help straight people—especially those within the church—learn the meaning of genuine compassion, inclusion, and Christ-like love. Talking about why a loving God would put the burden of homosexuality on his children, he says,

Our premise today is that homosexuality is an extra burden—an affliction, something that gays and lesbians must suffer through and, really, deny wholesale if we want to remain righteous in the eyes of our church. We are the subject of an extra ‘test’ that doesn’t seem to serve any known purpose.

But, what if there’s another way to look at it? What if the test, really, is not being given *to* gays and lesbians, but *through* gays and lesbians? And the test, then, is not for us at all—but for our heterosexual brothers and sisters?

The test might really be this: Will you, straight brother or sister, include us in your family of faith just as we are? Will you recognize us as your peers, your equals? Will you move past what you think you already know about what it means to be gay, open your mind and heart, and genuinely show Christ-like love and compassion to a segment of society that, for whatever reason, appears to be the least of these in this sphere?

Mitch says that he believes that institutions, like people, respond to positive reinforcement, and he is optimistic that with encouragement, the Church will continue to take positive steps with regard to LGBT issues.



'It is our universal duty as human beings and children of God to listen, learn and try to understand.'

Another person working in this area is Erika Munson. She is the founder of a grass roots LDS organization, called Mormons Building Bridges that supports education and reconciliation around LGBT issues. Members of this group have actively reached out to the LGBT community through things like participating in Utah's Pride Parade and helping to facilitate communication between members of the Church and their gay and lesbian brothers and sisters. Erika says,

Mormons Building Bridges encourages people on all sides of the issue to respectfully ask the person you have the least in common with, 'Tell me what it's like to be you.' It is our universal duty as human beings and children of God to listen, learn and try to understand.

And this, when you consider it, is not really different from our core value of 'I can learn from everyone.' When we take the time to really

listen to one another, I think we find that no matter where we are on the religious, political or social spectrum, what unites us is more than what separates us.

Thank you.