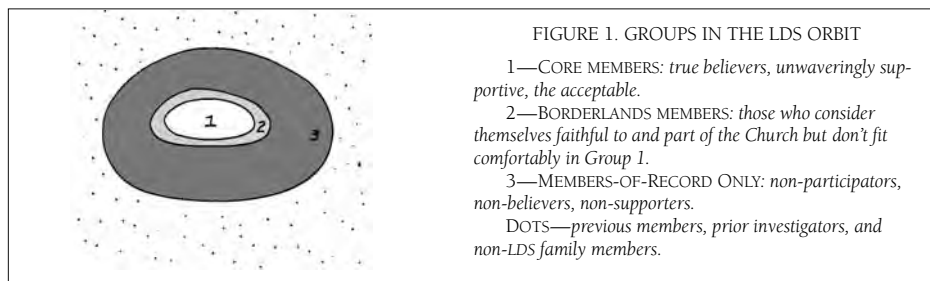


BRAVING THE BORDERLANDS . . .

YOUNG ADULT BORDERLANDERS
CONFRONT DATING

by D. Jeff Burton



IN THIS COLUMN, I share the story of Brad (not his real name) a Borderlander who is dealing with dating and finding a suitable mate. I have changed some details to protect his identity.

BRAD: Although raised in an active LDS family, I've always had nagging doubts and questions. I'm in my second year of medical school, and after some serious soul-searching, I would now describe myself as an agnostic, with a slight atheistic bent. I'm also an executive secretary in our bishopric. Go figure.

While I've thought about being blunt with my bishop, ward members, and family about my real beliefs, I don't see any real benefits from it. Even without the religious beliefs, so much of who I am is Mormon. I stand to lose a lot if I come clean with my leaders and family. While not a believer in the "truth" of the Mormon Church as we normally use that word, I feel the Church is a fine place for me to fulfill my spiritual needs. I have gotten a little better at remaining honest with myself, giving an acceptable talk during sacrament meeting, and learning how to deal with ward members.

But I'm not sure about how to handle dating. I seem to be too Mormon for the non-Mormon women I've dated but not Mormon enough for the Mormon women I meet and date. My main question is, how early should I come clean about my beliefs with a Mormon woman I'm dating? I don't

ever straight-up lie about my feelings about God or the Book of Mormon, but I can see how someone would assume from what I say that I'm just the average returned missionary with a normal testimony.

JEFF: Right now, you apparently have an approach that works for your bishop, family, and ward members. Though you may want to change your approach in the future, for now, you can work on moving towards honesty without causing too much trauma for yourself or others. When in a similar situation, I told my leaders that I didn't have a "knowing testimony" but that I had faith, hope, and a willingness to go along. It was always enough for them and allowed me to consider myself honest enough.

But the dating issue is much more complicated, serious, and urgent. I think most people who have been through this problem believe that early-on and up-front honesty with prospective mates is important. One of the first Borderland columns relates the story of someone like you who let a relationship develop too much before being open. His potential mate bolted when she found out that our man was not a "true-believer," which left both of them in considerable emotional stress.

When dating looks as if it could get serious, and when you're thinking about a woman as more than just a fun night out (or when she seems to think this way), it is important to get a positive view of your beliefs out on the table.

People have a range of specific (but mostly subconscious) pictures of the "ideal" mate. Early on, you should explore with your date her picture of the man she'd like as her husband. This may be a good time to be honest and help her compare you with her ideal. But even this isn't a cure-all. Sometimes a woman may go ahead and marry a man "in spite of what I really want," or, thinking that she'll change him, but still encounter problems later when the bloom wears off. This situation happens for men and women, Mormons and non-Mormons.

To avoid the issue of the "uncomfortable disclosure" entirely, you could look to find someone just like you, someone who would be happy to know on the first date that she is with a kindred spirit, or someone with a broad-brush approach to religious acceptability. You could visit groups who have similar beliefs and outlooks as yours. The Sunstone group, for example, has many Mormons like you who wouldn't be a bit surprised by your outlook and beliefs. Campus student groups leaning towards liberal arts or letters issues might be good place to look, too, if you're thinking a non-Mormon could be an acceptable mate.

You might also consider the shotgun-and-list approach to dating. When I was looking for a wife, I wrote a list of behaviors, attributes, and outlooks I'd like in a mate. I could tell pretty quickly whether a woman met the main criteria. So I went out with a number of women (mostly once) until I found someone who rated many check marks. This system may sound programmed and cold, but the items on my list weren't tough or inflexible. Here are some examples: "Kind." "Happy." "Laughs." "Knows how to listen and communicate." "Loves me." "Accepts my religious outlooks." "Doesn't see life in black and white terms." "Honest but tactful." "Cares about others." "Understands and accepts the Mormon culture." "Thoughtful." "Reasonable and likes to talk things through." "Compatible with me."

Before we became too serious, I showed the woman who turned out to be my future wife the list so we could discuss it. Turns out she had a list, too. She and I met most of the criteria on our respective lists. Nobody will meet every item on the other person's list. It turned out that Marlene was just right for me, and vice versa. We've been very happily married for years.

If you go the "shotgun-and-list" route, you'll make your own list, of course, but be

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willing to modify it as warranted and be flexible.

BRAD: I've been explicit about my beliefs with very few people. Early on, I tried being honest with Church members, but they always reacted poorly—very poorly—so I shut my mouth. It is strange that I am so much more comfortable telling non-members/outsiders/heathens my true feelings and beliefs. I guess I'm actually somewhat worried about my possible loss of status in members' eyes.

Last night I had a conversation with a long-time Mormon friend in another city. When I explained that for as long as she has known me, I would best be described as a skeptic, almost as an agnostic, she was definitely surprised. She asked some questions, such as what I based my life upon and so on. She finally said she was sad for me but then out of nowhere said she didn't think my beliefs made me a bad person, as if that's how most Mormons would react if they knew. That comment has stuck in my craw all day. I really don't know what to make of it. Is it just another example of the common belief that doubts or testimony issues are all based in problems with chastity, tithing, or the Word of Wisdom?

As for finding a suitable mate, your approaches to dating may have merit, but for several reasons, seem somewhat impractical for me. One, I've actually already tried a version of the shotgun approach to dating. I first floated the idea to a few male and female friends, all of whom endorsed the idea. I resolved to start asking out whomever at least once. The one consequence none of us foresaw (and this sounds arrogant to say) is that my dates seemed to develop an attachment to me, even after one date. I engendered a rash of bad feelings from women I had dated once who now felt I ignored or disliked them.

The other approach, finding someone in a Sunstone-type group, would be great, but such a forum does not exist here [in the midwestern part of the USA]. I know only a few "Liahonas" in town, and we have stumbled into each other quietly. Also, all are male, and so (for me) not dateable.

JEFF: Sorry to hear about your experience with the shotgun dating approach. That outcome is probably not unusual for a "good catch" like you. But I think the idea of developing and sharing your list of wants and needs with your dates is still worth working on. As for finding a Sunstone-type group, if you want, I could invite female

readers with a sympathetic ear to contact me and I could forward their contact information to you. Sunstone is a global community.

As for eventually "coming out" to members and leaders, that is a tough call for all Borderlanders, and each individual must approach it in a self-tailored way. One extreme approach is to simply keep your most "troublesome" beliefs (e.g., atheism, doubts about the official Joseph Smith story) secret and go through life "living on faith." Many do that, staying in the closet all their lives and living on hope, faith, and non-disclosure. The Church seems to be moving in the direction of letting "faith" be acceptable in lieu of having a "testimony." I've seen that attitude more and more at the higher levels, but such changes take a few years to translate down to the local level. At church today, I heard more about "how important it is to have and gain a testimony; live your testimony," than I did in all the sessions of the last General Conference. (I live in Bountiful, which might explain some of that. The story was different when I lived in Las Alamos, New Mexico.)

The other extreme is to just let it all out. There are benefits to this "suddenly honest" approach, but there are also major downsides if not handled with care. The main problems with this approach are that (1) you could cause your family emotional pain, (2) your life as a Mormon (or as a non-Mormon) will become different, (3) like many of us, in a few years, you may find yourself looking at life and religion in a completely different way, (4) you could experience a lot of emotional pain, and (5) regardless of how clear your explanations seem to you, others will not understand you or, worse, assign incorrect and damaging meanings to your experiences. The typical active Church member is just not ready for such upfront, bold honesty.

When you do find a way to come out, it will definitely be easier if you have a mate who is understanding and loves you for who you are. So, finding the right someone now could be quite liberating, both for now and the future. But there's no hurry on the "coming out" business. Take your time. Find that "helpmate."

BRAD: Okay, I'm exploring the idea of how to best communicate the fact that I have what one might call an "alternate faith" lifestyle in the Mormon Church, and finding someone to share that lifestyle with. I'm not sure I'm ready for "e-dating," though.

I spoke with another Mormon friend about the difficulties of telling a potential spouse about my belief set. She said I need to become a better salesman. I'd come out to her by saying something along the lines of, "I would describe myself as an agnostic with leanings towards atheism. And I've been this way for quite a while." She said those words were almost as "bad,"—her word—as if I'd said, "I'm a hermaphrodite"—again her words! Because I regard what she described as "good salesmanship" as really sugar-coating the truth, possibly even lying, this response probably just reflects what a poor businessman/politician I would make. However, I think she does have a point. In the chapter on honesty in your book, you briefly note that there is a significant difference between brutal honesty and honesty. I think I could benefit from exploring this idea more—I'm not sure really how to "pitch" my belief profile to others in a way that is positive and honest, not just blunt.

JEFF: I'm not sure about the "better salesman" approach. But early on, you do need to show prospective steady girlfriends (and especially a potential mate) that you are multi-dimensional, honest, good, and non-threatening (as well as someone who wonders about his religion and God). But that takes work and effort as well as finding someone with an open mind. And no matter what, it will require compromise and negotiations with "the one."

As for connecting you with others, I wasn't really thinking about "e-dating." I was thinking more along the lines of just inviting people on a similar intellectual/faith/spiritual path to be in contact with you and others for simple communication, friendship, and the sharing of ideas via email. If that sharing develops into something more . . . well, okay. In the past, Sunstone has maintained a "list" of people interested in talking with and meeting others. Let's see if they would be willing to revive that list.

The next column will explore the issues of accepting and serving a mission. If you have a story to share, please contact me. ☺

*Please send me your
experiences from life
in the Borderlands.*

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