Choosing to Stay

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My topic, “Choosing to Stay,” derives from a BYU Women’s Conference session I participated in a few days ago, but tonight’s remarks benefit from both reaction and reflection, not to mention a bit more time to share my thoughts with you. I pray that the Spirit will be present to communicate things that will enrich your life and inspire you.

My parents divorced when I was fifteen years old, and not long after that I was spending time with an uncle and aunt who were close to both my parents. My aunt said something interesting to me: “Do you know why your uncle and I are still together? It’s because we didn’t choose to divorce.” Her words surprised me at the time because it seemed, to young and unmarried me, that, if things get bad in a marriage, then divorce is what happens; that is what divorce is for. Now I realize that she was teaching me a valuable life lesson: Just because something is an option does not mean we have to choose it.

In other words, although leaving is always an option, there is something empowering and liberating when we choose to stay, especially if it involves very challenging, difficult things.

The option to leave, to walk away from the light, is crucial to our spiritual growth. If we now lived in Lucifer’s intended universe, where—to his credit alone, of course—he was guaranteeing that every one of us will go through life without making any mistakes, I would have to title my talk, “You Have No Choice but to Stay!” or simply, as in training a dog, “Stay!” Since we now live, instead, in an option-rich mortal existence, evidence that we chose God’s plan of agency over Satan’s compulsory scheme, being able to leave is a core part of the plan. Having the choice to stay or leave is central to a system that teaches us to use our agency. When we exercise our choice by staying, despite reservations or justifications to leave, we willfully act out our faith and make it stronger over time.

Our life’s course is shaped by decisions we make and opportunities that come along, and those opportunities vary dramatically depending on whether we are in or out of the Church. The very fact you are here this evening suggests strongly that you are prone to make decisions in favor of gathering with saints and searching for spiritual guidance, a decision that will continue to change your life course, and those of the people you love, forever.
Why leave the fold?

A sheepfold is a place of safety where we are guarded by the shepherd, and the term *fold* is a common euphemism used to describe the Church. In the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, we gather together like sheep under the watchful care of our shepherd, Jesus Christ, trusting in his protection and guidance. That doesn’t mean that, in the fold, there won’t be ticks and fleas, or fights among the sheep, but it does offer us warmth and protection from major, often unseen, dangers. So why would anyone want to leave that? A lot depends upon how they view the fold.

We can view the Church from a number of perspectives. For example, critics often view the Church as nothing more than a business enterprise, only interested in the bottom line, a view that conveniently ignores or devalues its core mission. Others choose to see the Church as one of many volunteer service organizations, like soup kitchens or food banks, where people of means may serve in their discretionary spare time in a way that makes them feel charitable, unselfish, and useful to the community.

Some people, and I think this is not uncommon among subgroups of Millennials, see the Church as a spiritual supermarket or online marketplace, where one shops for goods to consume to satisfy spiritual needs. This transactional approach, implied by the term “brand loyalty,” sets up a relationship with the Church wherein loyalty to it only continues as long as one is satisfied with the products it delivers, and when one is no longer perfectly satisfied, or when a more attractive or cheaper store opens up, one should take one’s business elsewhere.

Another way to view the Church stems from its early history, when it was comprised primarily of the Territory of Deseret. Like a mini-nation crafted in the image of the United States, it was (and is) a place into which some are born and others immigrate, through conversion. Cultural differences, changing practices, or varying leadership styles continually challenge both the natives and the immigrants of this Christ-centered nation-state.

While there are many different ways of viewing the Church, I think seeing it as a *family* may help us best understand the dynamics of staying and leaving. God has suggested that the family is the basic and best unit for personal and spiritual growth. We are all born into families, but likewise can be adopted into others, and most of us create our own through friendships and marriage. Family is a profound and fundamental concept. The Church, like a family, is a place designed for personal and spiritual growth. Despite the sacrifices it demands of us, we choose not to leave in part because we love the people in it (most of them, at least), and because we have learned to place the coherence of the whole above our own individual needs (most of the time). Family is about growing through sacrifice, and
losing ourselves in service to others, to find ourselves through the close community spirit that can only come when we do so. Recent changes in how the family and family life practices are viewed in American culture have consequences for the Church.

As we think about staying or leaving, I believe many of the same social forces, arguments, and dynamics at play in how we as a culture approach marriage and family also exert an influence on how we relate to the Church and, more broadly, formal religion. I alluded earlier to some Millennials’ consumerist view of religion, but I think their condition is, in part, a consequence of choices earlier generations have made. They inherited a consumerist view of family created for them through prior generations’ selfishness. I do not think it is coincidental that the generations born in the wake of the 60s divorce epidemic (that continues to this day) find it easy to walk away from the Church family, especially if they find it dissatisfying or troublesome.

**Family and History**

Greater access to information on the web can also influence our decisions to stay or to leave. We have all recently experienced the “Mormon Moment” in media, and, with stories about the Church appearing more frequently now, the impression one often gets is that hosts of people are leaving the Church over their discovery of “the real truth” behind Church history. It is easy to draw the conclusion that, if one is a sentient being with any intelligence at all, new revelations of historical discrepancies make leaving the smart, sensible, and perhaps only option.

I would argue that, in fact, the smart and sensible option is, as Elder Uchtdorf suggests, to question the questions, doubt the doubters. (“Come, Join with Us.” October 2013 Conference address) I think that, whenever we read something that seeks to persuade us to radically change our beliefs or behaviors, we should take a step back and ask ourselves: “Who benefits if I choose to leave, and who benefits if I choose to stay?” Historical accounts are often given much more credence than they deserve.

**The limits of history**

Stories are powerful; they are the way we make sense of our experiences and teach others about them. Story and history have come to mean two different things in English, even though in other languages, such as German, one word is used to describe both. Our sense of history as something different from a story reflects a change in how we ascribe accuracy and truth to narrative; the difference between
them parallels that between subjective and objective truth, between someone’s opinion and fact. We tend to believe written things over spoken things.

This kind of unexamined trust can be naïve, even dangerous to our faith. A fundamental premise of most historians is that the way past history has been written is inaccurate, that things were not as we have supposed and, as historians, they are trying to finally get the story right. This is the overarching thrust of most historiography, but in our bias for the modern we place an unjustifiable amount of trust in new histories, believing they “tell the real story.” The problem is, those stories will themselves inevitably be replaced and “corrected” by the next generation of historians.

Consider the role our modern sense of history plays in how we receive Joseph Smith’s description of the First Vision, which has come down to us in multiple narratives. (“First Vision Accounts,” Gospel Topics Essays, 2016) As we hear or read the account for the first time we are led to imagine the events in our minds with images, perhaps warbling birds and bright green leaves, based upon our personal assumptions of what “early in the spring” means. Those initial impressions and internal images become, for us, the story.

When he hear other versions, or other people describe how they imagine the First Vision, we inevitably will find differences from how we imagined it. Those differences lead to a dissonance that can be troubling and challenging, perhaps even leading us to the conclusion that the whole thing is false. Or we might welcome the added insight and detail other narratives offer us, realizing that our own perceived images are quite limited and perhaps even wrong.

For example, despite our perception that the spring green was bursting forth in the leaves of the Sacred Grove, we can learn, consulting historical weather records in the vicinity of Palmyra at the time of Joseph’s first vision, that there was probably not a speck of green anywhere, and very likely there was snow on the ground. (For six years my wife and I lived 100 miles from the Sacred Grove, and during that time my impression of “early spring” shifted back a month or two from how spring happens where I grew up in northern Utah.)

Learning more factual details can either update or undermine our first impressions, or in the case of the snow in the Sacred Grove, it may upend a long-held assumption about the context that we have taken as gospel for years or even decades. But do those details undermine the reality of that Vision itself? Only Joseph Smith experienced his vision, and his multiple accounts reflect different memories, different audiences, and a changing perspective on the significance of what really happened in the Sacred Grove.

Think back to your own your own “sacred grove” experience, your first taste of the Spirit, which you experienced in a poignant and profound way. It spoke truth to your soul. Yet to how many different people, and in how many different ways,
have you told the story of that experience? Have you come to view it differently over the course of your lifetime? Could someone compare all those retellings and try to prove that it never happened because of inconsistencies in your historical narratives?

Unfortunately, there are people who will use such logic or proof as a blunt instrument to undermine faith or trample on fragile personal belief. We need to learn to be resilient in our beliefs, and distrusting of people who use historical argument to try to confound us in our faith. We must ask ourselves what they have to gain from undermining our faith with incomplete proof, and what we might lose if we accept at face value the authority of their evidence.

As Elder Lawrence Corbridge noted in a recent BYU devotional, there are primary and secondary questions; the primary questions ask if we believe in the existence of God, Jesus Christ, and the Restoration of the Gospel. “If you answer the primary questions, the secondary questions get answered too, or they pale in significance and you can deal with things…without jumping ship altogether.” (“Stand Forever,” Lawrence E. Corbridge, BYU Devotional, 22 January 2019) The secondary questions, that include history, policy, social issues, etc., will always be there, and he suggests that when we find answers to some of these issues, others will crop up, since the mode of questioning is often designed to undermine, rather than sustain, or even allow for the existence of, belief. We need to remember, as we consider staying or leaving, whether the things that trouble us revolve around a core belief or something else.

As we can see from the early Restoration down through today, secondary questions, interpersonal conflicts, the lure of the world, and concerns over Church policy can send some saints packing. Not all stay away; some return at a later time. I would like to briefly share two illustrative cases from my own family.

Two Family Stories

The first family story tells of two brothers who helped establish a settlement in a remote area of Utah. As the town prospered they built a social hall and enjoyed many evenings of dancing. On one occasion one brother began dancing a waltz with his wife, and was reprimanded by the local church authority because, although dancing in general was highly promoted, there were certain dances that were not sanctioned, including the waltz. According to family lore, the brother exclaimed, “Brigham Young has no right to dictate how I dance with my wife!” and stormed out of the social hall and the Church. As the story has been passed down, that line of the family remained largely outside the fold for generations.

The other family story involves my paternal grandmother’s parents, Forrest Alabama and Sarah Kicklighter Shuman, who lived in backwoods Georgia at the
turn of the 19th century. After years of seeking for messengers from God, they finally met some missionaries and were baptized in 1907. As they grew in faith, they heeded the call to Zion and took their large family by train to the West, only to be swindled by a rural bishop who sold them a false claim to property, so they returned to Georgia. A few years later, prompted to try once more, they traveled again to Utah, but this time suffered economic hardship, sickness, and the death of a young child. Seeing no other option left, they went back to the South, taking their young boy’s body with them. Finally, a few years later, they took a third journey by rail and settled in northern Utah, where they stayed and eked out a living. They chose to leave Zion twice, but ultimately chose to stay, and that choice has made all the difference, blessing five generations and counting.

When we choose to leave, we limit the kind of blessings we can receive, and over a lifetime this can have a multi-generational impact. When we choose to stay in the Church, or remain faithful to other sacred covenants, we open a conduit for blessings to flow continuously into our lives and those of our posterity, down through generations.

**Christ’s View of Leaving**

However, there always have been and always will be reasons to abandon the Church. Such a dynamic is a fixture of the Kingdom at any time. Christ saw many who rejoiced in his teachings at first eventually leave, even asking his core disciples, “Will you also go away?” Peter’s response is instructive: “Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life.” (John 6:67-68; italics added) Those who choose to leave may be pursuing what they believe to be a better way, or may be abandoning what they feel is a difficult road. Or they may feel as though everyone else is leaving and they do not want to be left alone. Peter stayed because he felt love from and loved Christ, and because he found hope and promise in Christ’s teachings.

**Parable of the Sower**

As a convert-dependent Church, we, like Christ’s disciples, will always witness people joining and leaving the fold. The Parable of the Sower is a moving and instructive story Christ taught his disciples—and us—to help them deal with the vagaries of people’s reception or rejection of the Word. (Mark 4:1-20) The sower casts his seeds broadly (the origin of our word “broadcast,” by the way), and they fall among a variety of places and suffer a variety of fates. It is important to note that there is nothing bad about any of the seeds; it is the soil where the seeds land, and the conditions there, that make all the difference. As an amateur
gardener, I take comfort in the idea that there are remediations for all the soil problems noted in the parable: stones can be removed, packed soil can be broken up, weeds can be plucked out of the ground, and we can devise ingenious scarecrows!

I believe that at varying times our hearts can resemble all four kinds of soil. We might be fertile ground to certain core beliefs, while others that we accept can be choked out when we fear or obsess over things that don’t matter, and yet others can lay dormant and be snatched away before they have a chance to root.

It is interesting, and instructive, that Christ mentions varying harvest rates, one seed yielding 30, 60, or even 100 times its value. Those remarkable yields mirror the miracles gardeners and farmers witness at each harvest. But in a Gospel context, where the bounty is in human relationships, the dramatic difference in yield is something Christ wants us to keep foremost in our minds. No one responds to the truth the same way, and we should be careful not to judge our worth by another’s bounty and our meager reaping. Indeed, all of us will have our stony days.

I don’t believe Christ taught the Parable of the Sower to describe a deterministic universe where, if we happen to be weedy soil, there is no future for us in agriculture. He told the Parable to give us hope. He wanted to destroy the myth we so readily create that all happy saints are alike and the implication that, in our stony days, we are worthless or have no hope. In fact, just the opposite. Just like a rich and bounteous, fruitful, garden, the Church is filled with a stunning variety of people, each growing according to the nature of their unique spiritual genetic code and the soil they find themselves in. All share in common the beneficial effects of water, nourishment, and, above all, a steady stream of light. There are no weeds in God’s garden; we need them all, need to learn how to love them all. So, if we feel like a carrot among tomatoes or an eggplant among the bell peppers, our challenge is not to pick up roots and try growing somewhere else, but to accept, even relish, our differences and keep growing to see what miraculous harvest we will offer the great Gardener someday.

**Prodigal Son**

Another of Christ’s parables is instructive as we consider the dynamics of leaving and staying: The Parable of the Prodigal Son. (Luke 15:11-32) In it we find a wise and loving father who gives his younger son agency to spend his fortune immediately and epically! As he “comes to himself,” a telling phrase that we all understand from experiencing our own prodigal moments, he decides to return home destitute, banking his hopes on being able to find employment as a lowly servant on his father’s farm. His father’s joy at his return, and his open arms,
contrast strongly with the reaction of his older brother, who sees instead a fortune wasted and a prize-winning calf barbecued in his brother’s honor.

As in the Parable of the Sower, we may play each of these three characters during our lives: like the prodigal, we make our mistakes, are tortured by them, repent, and seek (and find) forgiveness from a loving Father in Heaven. Like the father, we also watch people we love make self-harming decisions, then wait and worry over their fate, doubly rejoicing when they return to us. And, like the elder son, we have probably felt jealousy or indignation when we think another is getting away with something, emotions that blind us to the real dynamics of love and forgiveness that undergird the fold.

I’ve often speculated on the subsequent life of the younger brother. I don’t think he left again, for one thing. His experiences in the world taught him some valuable, if expensive, lessons. And he learned how much his father truly loved him. Did he never take the easy, comfortable path again? Knowing human nature, he probably did, but perhaps not in such a drastic manner and with such drastic results. He certainly remembered and felt the consequences of his prodigal days.

In regards to those who choose to leave, I know they are missing out on a very focused and particular kind of education in the fold, one that comes through access to the Spirit and revelation from God. But their education does not cease. They are like people who head directly into the workforce straight out of high school despite having a scholarship for college. They are not cut off from learning or from a rich life experience, but by willfully refusing the greater opportunities a college education can bring them, they make the journey to those goals more difficult.

That does not mean if we stay in the fold we are automatically better off. The prodigal son’s elder brother, who retains his inheritance, betrays his lack of meaningful learning in the narrow way he views his brother’s return. In my imagined sequel to the story, I sometimes see him obsessing so much over the perceived inequity of his younger brother’s return to favor that he hoards his riches to his dying day and, unlike his father, never learns to be generous or forgiving.

I see many students who take full advantage of the learning opportunities at college, and I see others who, like the prodigal son, squander their time either by spending it all on cheap distractions or, worse, by taking a quick, easy path that does not challenge them nor give them a chance to explore new interests or discover hidden talents. They metaphorically tread water for four years and come out of college little changed from when they went in.

In my capacity as dean I have the privilege to associate with students in our Bachelors of General Studies program, designed for people who dropped out of BYU and then return later in life to finish up. They come for a chance to complete their degree, but express a hunger and thirst for learning. To their credit, they bring
rich experience to the table that transforms the way they learn things the second time around, and it is a glorious experience to watch them walk across the podium to receive their diplomas!

The story of the Prodigal Son reminds us that God sees all people from the spirit of love, from a true perspective on who they really are—His children—and how they can use their agency to change their minds and return to the fold. Like the father in the story, when people we love choose to leave, we can choose to love them even more.

**Friends Who Stay**

As I reflect back on people I have known in my lifetime, I think of friends and family members who have never chosen to leave, and others who have returned to the fold and now enjoy great blessings alongside fellow saints. When we choose to leave, we are left to suffer the consequences of our actions alone, to have the full weight of our sins land upon us in the often-random way they do. Some people believe that leaving the Church is a way to escape from guilt and the oppression of sin-consciousness, and although abandoning the faith may temporarily lift the sense of guilt that can haunt us in a community, sooner or later the existential weight of our actions will settle upon us in all its limiting and punishing weight. If we choose to stay, we are never more than a heartfelt prayer away from a listening ear, an understanding heart, and fellow travelers along the path of faith. I gain great strength from the example of two of my friends who chose, and continue to choose, to stay.

**Charles Inouye**

A fellow professor, Charles Inouye, describes how, as a graduate student, he felt compelled to leave the Church because he “didn’t have an answer to the question of how smart people could honestly believe in all parts of the Mormon narrative.” He decided to make one last trip to Church and then leave for good. As he was walking out of the chapel his home teacher saw his distress and asked if he was okay. My friend demurred, so the home teacher added “If there’s anything I can do to help you, just let me know.” Then a woman he was called to home teach stopped him and said, with tears in her eyes, “When are you going to come and home teach me?”

He steeled himself and walked out into the bright sunlight and, a few minutes later, alone in the parking lot, he had a moment of enlightenment. “I

1 https://www.fairmormon.org/testimonies/scholars/charles-shiro-inouye
wanted to escape, to distance myself like Jonah of old. But I was stopped by one man who wanted to help me, and by one woman who needed my help. That was no coincidence. The message couldn’t be clearer. ‘Charles, you think you need everything to make sense in an intellectual way; and you demand that knowledge now. But what you really need to learn at this point is how to be loved and how to love. Focus there for a while, and maybe someday things will make more sense.’ I decided not to leave the church. I went back that next Sunday, and I’ve been going back ever since.”

Charles describes himself as determined to go, and when he left the chapel he was leaving the Church, literally and figuratively. But when he went back the next week, he was staying, and that is the state in which he remains: staying.

As he learned, if we see the Church only as a systematic philosophy possessing certain truth claims, we will be disappointed at some point, because, as Elder Corbridge notes, the secondary questions are not designed to promote belief, but rather to downplay or challenge belief. It is important, then, that we remember the Church’s role as a clinic for sinners, a vehicle for sealing people across time and space, and a means to learn how to love and be loved. It rarely, if ever, has aligned with the world’s fickle tastes in intellectual or other matters.

The Japanese English Professor

A couple of years ago I had the privilege of returning with my daughter to Japan to visit some of the areas where she had served as a missionary. In one ward I was introduced to a man my daughter had told me about, an English literature professor at the local university. We struck up a casual correspondence, and this past Christmas I sent him a card, which he responded to with a letter that shined a light into his soul.

Dear Professor MILLER,

Thank you very much for the unique Christmas card, and many apologies for this tardy response.

It becomes sometimes difficult for me to keep as strong faith in the LDS teachings as other church members do, especially because I was brought up in non-Christian circumstances. I am continuing my Christian life, simply hoping the church’s interpretation of the scriptures is true. [italics added]

Kind Regards.
I relish this letter, and it’s closing line: *I am continuing my Christian life, simply hoping the church’s interpretation of the scriptures is true*. I believe it can teach us several things. First, we can learn that choosing to stay is a challenge to saints all around the world, a global choice, one made by people in myriad cultures, each with its own unique set of challenges. In his case, he was not raised as a Christian, his family expresses opposition to his attending church, and he teaches at a university where simply being Christian marginalizes him from his colleagues.

Second, as we read the letter closely, we learn that he supposes himself to be weaker in faith than others in his ward and stake. Don’t we all assume this, sometimes? Isn’t it easy to assume the best about others and the worst about ourselves, especially when it comes to the strength of our faith? As he illustrates, we should not allow this to discourage us to the point of choosing to leave.

Finally, as he notes, he is nevertheless “continuing [his] Christian life, simply hoping the church’s interpretation of the scriptures is true.” As a highly educated man he nevertheless puts his trust in the way his fellow saints in the fold interpret the scriptures, and seeks to learn from them.

So, let us *all choose to stay*. How we do so will be different for each of us, because we are each distinct from one another, and the Spirit will speak to us in our own distinctive language, at times whispering us back into the fold, as it did my friend Charles. We must be willing, as my Japanese professor friend, to continue our faithful life with simple hope, a belief that we are learning true things.

Sometimes we may be tempted to leave because we can’t handle the tension that comes from the implications of the Gospel’s verity: we fear that, if it is true, we can’t be fully true to it. Or, perhaps, we fear that we might be completely missing out on the real truth out there somewhere, or we also fear that there might not be a real truth out there somewhere, and conclude that we must abandon all the hope that has sustained us so far in life.

I return to where I began: *choosing to stay* implies use of agency; a choice, not compulsion. Think of times in your life when you have been forced to do something particularly onerous, or grudgingly did it kicking and screaming every step of the way. Compare that to other difficult tasks when, in spite of the difficulty, you have willfully decided to own your choice to do it. Often that choice, the use of your agency to do something anyway, makes all the difference between joyful accomplishment and a kind of resentful slavery.

I testify that willfully staying in the fold is a choice that will always bring us blessings, a choice that allows us the priceless gift of spiritual guidance through the Holy Ghost. The Spirit is our greatest reward for not choosing to leave, the most useful and powerful gift we can receive to help us not only to stay, but to thrive in
our particular sheepfold, our garden, our community of imperfect and diverse believers!

May we, like my still-married aunt and uncle, choose not to leave, and with that decision bless those we love most for generations to come.

In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.