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# My Son the Mormon

When he told me he wanted to become a Mormon at age 16, I faced strong reactions from people close to me—and had questions of my own



Photograph by Matthew Worden

I always wanted faith to be an important part of my son's life, but I had no idea how far he'd take it.

I found out on a Sunday three years ago when I witnessed his full-immersion baptism at age 16. Harry had joined the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

His best friend since kindergarten, Curt Anderson—a life-long Mormon—facilitated the ceremony. Both wore white cotton jumpsuits. When Curt's mother, Liz, came into the room, I motioned her over. As the sacrament began, she took my hand. Our loud, messy teenagers, our wild soccer boys—who would have guessed they'd end up in a baptismal font together?

**HARRY HADN'T HAD** an easy childhood. His exciting but volatile father, Michael, was an alcoholic who quit drinking and progressed to an uneasy recovery. Michael and I raged long after the divorce papers were signed. On my own, I didn't shine in the workplace. My salary fell short for a Bethesda hom-

**Harry and his childhood friend Curt Anderson, a Mormon who helped with Harry's baptism.**

owner, but I was determined to keep Harry and his older brother, Clayton, in the Walt Whitman High School district. At one point, I suffered a six-month depression. When he was 14,

Harry was diagnosed with a life-threatening brain disorder, from which he recovered.

Despite all this, his steady stepfather, Chuck, once said to me, "Of our four kids, you have to admit Harry has had the easiest life."

Speechless for a minute, I admitted Harry did make life look easy. He laughs joyfully. His stride is carefree. Friends, both boys and girls, flow in and out of our house. A photo taken in Nantucket one summer prompted several people to say Harry looked like a young Jack Kennedy. He's the kind of kid whom teachers enjoy having in class, regardless of his academic performance.

His father and I came from Catholic backgrounds but drift-

ed away from the Church. When Harry was two, I experienced a healing through prayer that resulted in my becoming a born-again Christian. As a result, Harry's first church was charismatic Christian, full of committed people who embraced us and prayed as I've never seen people pray before or since. Unfortunately, some of them saw a devil behind every tree. The intensity was too much, and I moved on.

Harry's father took him to an Episcopal church on Capitol Hill. I sampled a variety of places before settling in at Bethesda's Fourth Presbyterian, where Bible messages were on target without the hysteria. Prayer was sincere at Fourth, and there was belief in prayer for healing and anointing with oil for that purpose, but it was done in a pastor's office rather than in a sanctuary with 20 hands on you.

Harry became involved with two youth groups. At his dad's church, St. Mark's, he was an acolyte and went on weekend retreats. At Fourth Presbyterian, closer to his home base with me, there were mid-week activities, Sunday school, ski trips, and summer camp.

**KIDS WHO GO** to church sometimes take their friends along, and this happened with Harry and his buddies. During the early part of his junior year of high school, I noticed he wasn't as engaged at Fourth and was skipping Sunday school. I didn't nag because I was confident his spiritual base was strong and he'd come back to church eventually.

That fall, Harry was visiting his friend Curt's Mormon church with increasing frequency. Chuck and I didn't take notice until Harry asked if he could go away for a weekend youth retreat.

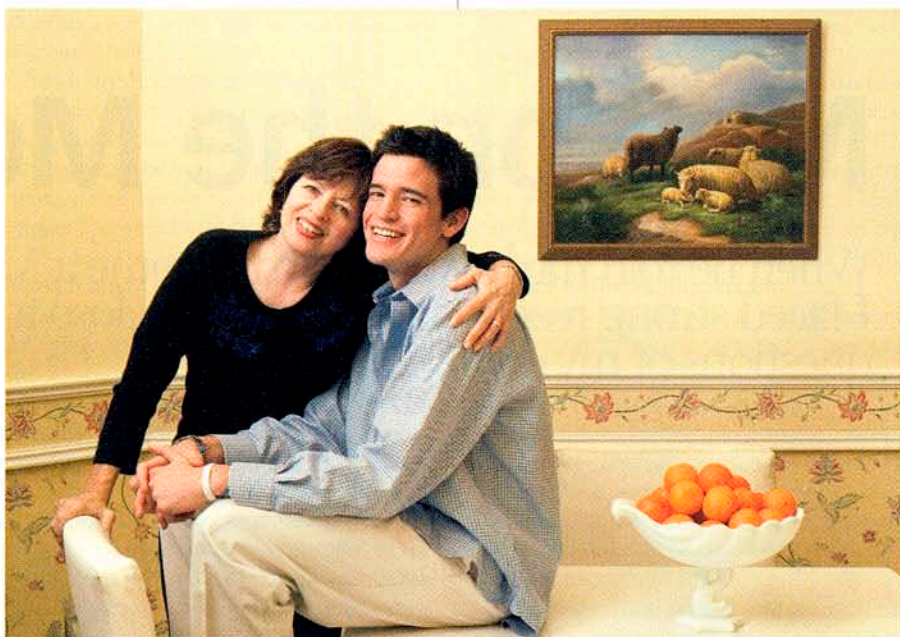
I said, "You're going to so many Mormon activities you're going to become a Mormon."

"Maybe I will," he said.

After the retreat, Harry told us he was serious about his interest in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or LDS—the official name of the Mormon Church.

"Is it okay if a bishop comes here to talk to you?" he asked. "I need your permission before I can study with their missionaries."

My calm reaction took me—and my husband—by surprise, as I react strongly to just about everything. But as a born-again Christian, I have an internal guard against negative reactions to religious belief. Plenty of acquaintances in our liberal Washington circles have felt free to insult "my people" in front of me. It isn't unusual to hear people trumpeting the pro-choice position that "anyone with any education,



The author, shown with her son, says: "The prejudice I've encountered as a born-again Christian was one rein holding back negative reaction to Harry's news. The other was love."

sophistication, or intelligence" would applaud. Sometimes I'm silent; sometimes I say, "That's me you're talking about."

The prejudice I've encountered was one rein holding back negative reaction to Harry's news. The other was love.

Harry is the boy I worried about after handing him over to his dad every other weekend since age three, the boy they wheeled away from me at the Mayo Clinic before screwing a head frame into his skull for the radiation treatment that cured his brain disorder. This is a child who enjoys selecting jewelry for me almost every Mother's Day, Christmas, and birthday. He began when he was eight, with what appeared to be a one-carat diamond solitaire pendant.

"Don't cry, Mommy," he said. "The lady at Nordstrom said it's not real—it's a scientific creation."

If my Harry was pro-Mormon, I couldn't be anti.

**CHUCK AND I** asked what had sparked this interest.

"I don't feel at home at Fourth or St. Mark's," Harry said. "A lot of kids at those churches claim to be serious about their faith, but on Saturday night they act like every other kid, drinking and stuff. Sunday morning, they're sorry. The next Saturday it's the same thing."

I was relieved that instead of turning away from church altogether, he wanted to plug in somewhere else.

I knew almost nothing about the Mormon faith and wanted to let the bishop

come so I could hear the story from a member.

The vague negative association lurking in my brain was emanating from when I was a member of that small charismatic church. A popular book in our bookstore explained how to evangelize to non-Christians.

I was turned off by the thought of pulling people away from the faith they were practicing. If they had no faith at all, or a weak tie to the religion of their childhood, or if they were ill or in trouble and asking questions, then I could respond with all the love and enthusiasm I had for Christ. I've been glad to share how my faith has given me a sense of self, compassion, and direction.

I couldn't resist sending one e-mail about Harry's new religious interest: I wrote to a messianic Jewish missionary I've been friends with for 15 years. This Jew who had found Jesus shot back a reply that burned like hellfire: "When I read your note re: Harry exploring Mormonism, I immediately began weeping, my spirit was so grieved."

He pleaded with me to try to stop Harry and listed all the reasons Mormons were not real Christians. Scripture verses were fired at me. I'd always hated canned formula, but I promised to talk to our pastor. I did, and Harry came along. He defended his decision politely and firmly.

**AS CHUCK AND I** told friends about Harry's spiritual exploration, reaction was mixed. Many people know one fact about the LDS church, and it's usually a weird one:

"Did you know that the young missionaries can't be in contact with their families except for Mother's Day and Christmas?"

"I knew a Mormon once, and he was so nice, but did you know Mormons hand over 10 percent of their salaries to the church?"

"It's all run by men. The women don't work because they have such big families."

"Watch out. Harry will probably marry really young—and often." The polygamy jokes never stopped.

At the Methodist church I had joined when I married Chuck, most were supportive, some in a backhanded way. "There are a lot of worse things he could get into at his age," one woman said. She wasn't the first or last to say that. I started to feel defensive before I even dipped a toe into Mormon waters.

**WHEN I CALLED** Bishop Brad Colton to schedule a visit, I had to ask, "If Harry becomes a Mormon, will it separate him from us? Will he feel he's a better Christian?"

Bishop Colton explained, "Becoming a Mormon should only make Harry a better son, closer to his family. The only thing you might not like is that if he gets married in the temple, non-Mormons can't attend.

**"There are a lot of worse things he could get into at his age," one woman said of Harry's conversion. She wasn't the first or last to say that.**

Many families in this situation have some kind of ring ceremony at the reception."

"What about going on a mission?" I asked. "Is it true kids can't talk to their parents during that time?"

"Forty percent of Mormon youth do a mission," he said. "It's not mandatory. When I was on my mission, my dad was an attorney who traveled a lot, and we met up six times over the two years I was away."

I had a million concerns. Colton patiently addressed every one. My anxiety was calmed.

**THE ORGANIZATIONAL STYLE** of LDS is volunteer lay leadership, volunteer teaching, and volunteer-run church services. In

keeping with this arrangement, the bishop was also a volunteer; by day he was an area manager for the Marriott Corporation. When he came to our house, we discovered we knew people in common.

Chuck and I asked him to give us an overview of the LDS faith, which begins with the story of Joseph Smith Jr., a 14-year-old boy who lived in Palmyra, New York, during the early 1800s.

Many preachers came to town, and Joseph knew he wanted to be part of a congregation but was confused about which to join. As instructed in the Bible (James 1:5), he prayed for God's wisdom. God and Jesus appeared to Joseph in a grove of trees and told him that all the denominations had gone astray from Christ's teachings. They told Joseph he would form a new church, in which people would worship and live the way God intended.

Christ had 12 disciples; the LDS church would be structured the same way. God is the father; Mormons call each other brother and sister and treat each other as family. Mormons believe God didn't stop speaking directly to his people when Christ died. He spoke to Joseph Smith, and there would be other prophets hearing God's instructions until our last days on earth. Christ told people to go out and spread

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the good news. The LDS church has more than 50,000 missionaries around the world at any time.

As soon as Joseph Smith began sharing the message of his vision, he was persecuted. In 1823 he wrote, "I had actually seen a light, and in the midst of that light I saw two personages, and they did in reality speak to me; and though I was hated and persecuted for saying that I had seen a vision, yet it was true; and while they were persecuting me, reviling me, and speaking all manner of evil against me . . . I could not deny it, neither dared I do it."

Three years later, Smith was praying in his room when the angel Moroni appeared to him. Moroni is portrayed on the highest spire of the Mormon temple that rises over the Beltway in Kensington. Smith wrote of Moroni: "He said there was a book deposited, written upon gold plates, giving an account of the former inhabitants of this continent."

Smith was directed by Moroni to the plates, buried near the Smith property. The Book of Mormon is Joseph Smith's translation of an ancient text. Smith wasn't educated; he had spent only a few years in elementary school before being pulled out to work on his family's farm.

**THE BISHOP EXPLAINED** things that I didn't understand, but I wasn't in a position to argue. Who was I to say that Jesus hadn't visited North America to teach here as he had in Israel?

The bishop stressed that the LDS church is Christ-centered, not Smith-centered. That became evident in everything I heard in the months to come—in conversations, the missionary lessons, a trip to Salt Lake City that was part of Harry's precollege tour, and several church services in Potomac.

As our talk wound down, it went from serious theology to the mundane: Why don't Mormons drink coffee? It took me a while to grasp that the prohibition involved a revelation to Joseph Smith in 1833 that had to do with hot drinks, interpreted to be coffee and tea, along with alcohol and tobacco. Okay, we know tobacco is harmful to all, alcohol to many—but I'll never understand the coffee-and-tea reasoning.

The strict LDS moral code is one that most high-school juniors wouldn't be at-

.....  
*Ann Cochran (traveltales@comcast.net) is a frequent contributor to the magazine. Her son Harris Clarke recently completed his sophomore year at Brigham Young University. This fall he begins serving as a missionary in northern Italy for two years.*

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tracted to, but it sounded good to me: no smoking, no alcohol, and no sex before marriage.

Another positive note was the music coming from Harry's room. Obscenity-laced rap from the likes of Jay-Z and Eminem was replaced by Lonestar and Garth Brooks.

**HARRY TOLD US** that when he read about Joseph Smith's search for a church, "it hit my heart—that was me."

With his observation of inconsistent behavior in his peers and his spiritual connection to this faith, I couldn't object. Chuck and I gave the missionaries the green light.

The bishop said the lessons didn't have to be at our home, but they could be. I told him that was fine with me.

"We don't want you to feel that anything is hidden or secret from you," he said. "You can sit in or not. You can be in the kitchen while they're in the dining room, or you can be out of earshot completely."

The missionaries were two 20-year-olds. Elder Noble, from Toronto, was particularly engaging. He had converted at Harry's age. His parents had objected to his interest and asked him to wait a year. He agreed to wait to be baptized but wanted to attend

**"At Harry's baptism, three boys talked about his character. Each, at different points, said, 'I love him.'"**

church and youth activities. They told him if his grades suffered, he'd have to stop. He went from B's and C's to straight A's.

It made me sad when he said that although he kept in touch with his parents through weekly letters, it was hard to communicate "because they really aren't interested in the work I'm doing."

Noble offered me his parents' phone number. He thought they'd be glad to tell me about what it was like when he converted. He was right.

It was clear they loved their son but were bewildered by the path he had chosen. I wondered if I had done more harm than good by telling them what a delightful son they had. I wanted them to worry less; instead I may have made them miss him more. I wanted them to know he was eat-

ing well. I'm sure his mother wished she was cooking for him and that they, not we, were taking him out to dinner.

Harry's six lessons fascinated me. I was impressed that none of it seemed formulaic and no topic was uncomfortable.

Most of the basics of any Christian faith were covered, including grace, salvation, and living a righteous—not self-righteous—life. If I had to guess, I'd say only about 15 percent was LDS-specific. After I sat in on one lesson, I realized I was asking so many questions that the session was meeting more of my needs than Harry's. During subsequent lessons, I spent the hour or so in the kitchen, where I could listen while cooking. When curiosity got the better of me, I popped into the dining room but withdrew as soon as my question was answered.

Once, Elder Noble responded, "Hey, we're just 20-year-old kids—we don't know everything. I'll check and get back to you."

**AT HARRY'S BAPTISM**, the church was filled with family, LDS members, and Fourth Presbyterian teenagers. Three boys talked about Harry's character and how he'd showed interest in their faith. They said he was "just like us" and had "the same values." →

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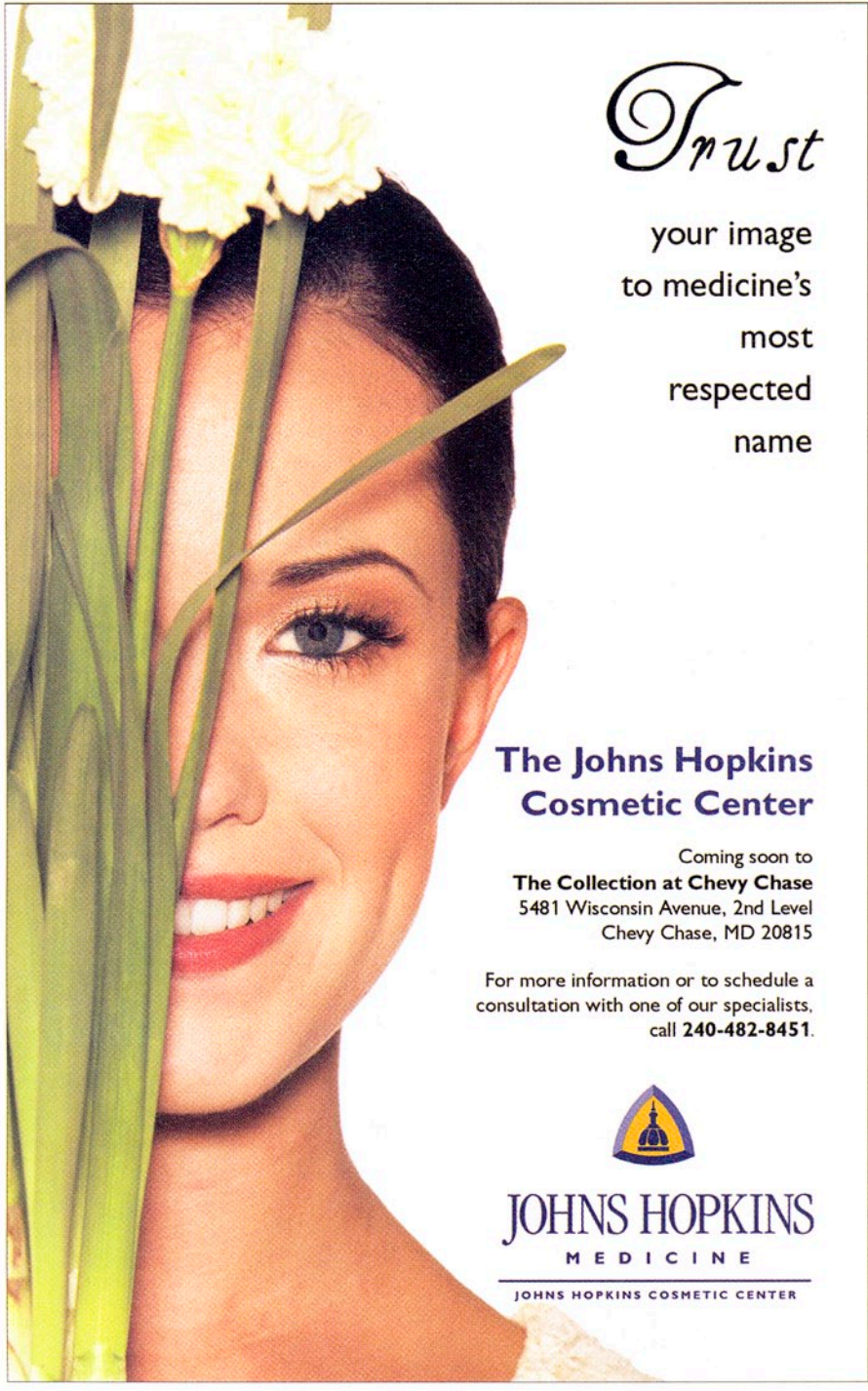
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**MY SON THE MORMON**

Harry, they said, had so many questions that one of the boys, Scott Foulger, called in his father, Bryant, who spent the evening discussing LDS history and beliefs with Harry. After that, Harry asked one of the boys if they had a Book of Mormon he could borrow.

"I was shocked that he actually read it," Scott said.

Each of the boys, at different points, said of Harry, "I love him." Several adults spoke—all movingly, all male. One was the teenage boys' teacher, Randy Cone, who had converted in his early twenties. He told of how hard that had been: "I was doing something so positive, and yet I was hurting my Catholic mother."


He complimented Michael, Chuck, and me on our support for Harry's exploration and decision. Then the bishop thanked us for raising a young man who cared so much about matters of the soul.

**SINCE HARRY'S CONVERSION,** Chuck and I have been included in church barbecues and other social events. Michael has also been drawn back to services. There hasn't been pressure to hear more about the faith. I'm comfortable asking questions because every time I do I receive a direct answer. I don't fear "next step" advice about what to read or where to learn more.

The people of the Bethesda and Potomac wards—congregations—that my son worships with seem like extended family. The more time I spend with these people, the more I respect them, admire them—love them.

If one theme runs through LDS services and speeches, it's finding the truth for yourself through prayer. When we're with Mormons, I've noticed my husband glancing at me. It has happened as we've sat in the LDS church on Mother's Day, when I've parted from him to attend the women's class on another Sunday, and at dinners with our favorite missionaries. "Will she or won't she?" he wonders.

I joke that I can't become a Mormon because I love Starbucks too much. The truth is I'm not looking for a new church, but I'm happy about Harry's decision. I believe that if he lives the values of his new church, he'll have a marriage that lasts, a good work ethic, and a spirit of service.

His faith brings me peace. I watched my son with pride as he finished high school without alcohol fueling his fun, with fabulous friends, and with Christ in his heart and on his bedroom wall. At the same time, he's still a teen who drives too fast, spends too much, and talks back. But now when he aggravates me, I say: "I don't think nice Mormon boys act that way." 

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