

# Householding: A Quaker-Mormon Marriage

Heidi Hart

The scene: my house on any weekday evening. The table's scattered with toy airplanes, homework, books, the orange-eyed cat that's recently adopted us, and several chewed-up pencils. I'm hunting for my keys on my way out to teach a class. Our nephew, who's been living with us since he started college, hunts for pizza in the fridge. My husband, Kent, is negotiating with our seven-year-old son, who says there's absolutely nothing in this house that's fit to eat. Our oldest son is reading and declares that he needs silence. The dog is circling each of us in turn and yapping for attention. The phone rings. Neighbor girls appear at the front door, fund-raiser envelopes in hand. Someone's left the water running in the bathroom sink. The dryer buzzes again and again, as if annoyed at us for not responding instantly.

My home's as fragmented as anyone's in middle-class America. Add to this our split along religious lines: I've become a Quaker, while my husband has stayed faithful to the LDS Church that raised us. Our boys still go to church with Kent; sometimes they all come with me, more or less willing to adjust to the silence and the fact that we sing Beatles songs sometimes. Kent prepares his Gospel Doctrine lessons amid a pile of notes in the basement family room; in our kitchen, I post notices from the computer about a monthly Quaker peace vigil. Kent puts on a dress shirt

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and a tie for stake priesthood meeting; I host the Ministry and Counsel Committee, which has spiritual care of our congregation, over tea in the dining room. Often our worlds intersect. Quaker friends come to our house for dinner, and we attend ward socials as a family. I go to sacrament meeting when I can, loving my boys' presence next to me but squirming during militant hymns about "the righteous" and "the wicked." Our former family life has broken into pieces; our challenge is to make a home to hold them all.

During my transition out of Church activity, we had a family home evening that involved a bowl of broken glass. We discussed the creation story handed down from Rabbi Isaac Luria in which God's divinity is shattered into pieces at the beginning of the world. I told our boys that our job as human beings is to gather the pieces of goodness scattered all around us. We washed our hands to prepare for the object lesson. I let the boys drop two glasses into a deep mixing bowl. As the clear glass crashed into fragments, the boys held their breath. We held the bowl in our hands. Light glanced off a dozen slivered edges. I wish I'd used the word *Tikkun* to describe the Jewish belief in mending what is broken; I wish we'd talked about the violence in Israel and the religious divide in our own community. At the time, my view was concentrated on our own small house. We all sensed, as we reached into the bowl to touch the shattered glass, that our family was about to come undone.

It hasn't, at least not in the way I feared. Kent and I are still together. We still make choices prayerfully and come to similar conclusions, whether we have listened to the "Mormon" Holy Ghost or the "Quaker" Inner Light. Our boys are still the curious, fun-loving creatures they have always been. But every day I wake up knowing there are gulfs among us that will take attention, love, and honesty to cross. When my seven-year-old Evan came into my room one day and said, "I know you're a peace-lover, Mom, but I really love lethal weapons," I didn't know whether to laugh or to cry. Then he asked me, "Can we be different about this?" I swallowed my impulse to preach and told him that of course we could—though a toy tank and a Nerf dart-launcher are the only "lethal" items in his room. After I shared this story with my Quaker community, a Friend shared hers: she and her husband took their son to every weapons museum in Europe until, at twelve, he sat for two hours contemplating Goya's paintings of the day before and the day after a battle, and began to form his own social conscience. I'll have to trust my boys to do the same.

I don't know if we're putting pieces back together as we negotiate our differences every day, but maybe we can make them into something beautiful. Since attending a concert at Los Angeles' Disney Hall, I carry the image of its gleaming rose-shaped fountain made from shards of Delft china. I also carry the words of Quaker Judith Brutz: "Out of our brokenness make us a blessing."<sup>1</sup> Maybe we can learn how to let go of those expectations that might harm each other. Maybe we will find that we share a core gospel: *Love each other*. Though Kent often hears, "This must be really, really hard for you," and though some people ask me how I can allow my children to attend "such a controlling, patriarchal church," I know there's common ground, and good, in both traditions. I'd rather spend time finding it than live in the cold war Kent and I fought for the first decade of our marriage.

Recently I found myself back in a room that held a memory of those hostile years. The week before his fortieth birthday, Kent was ordained a high priest. His family and mine gathered at a nearby church building. We sat in cushioned folding chairs and spoke in whispers, a habit I have not forgotten. I took in my surroundings as the bishop came to "card" the men in the room, checking to be sure their temple recommends were current before they stood in the blessing circle. Kent and I shared a laughing look. He knew I'd think this practice more than bizarre after leaving Mormonism for a spiritual community that values "that of God in everyone." I did. But even stranger was the realization that I'd spent a hundred angry Sundays in this very room the first two years that Kent and I were married.

We attended church here back in student days. In this room, I heard deflated-looking mothers read words by Church patriarchs about the sacredness of women. In this room, I heard that none of us could do enough to merit Christ's atoning sacrifice; and yet if we repented of our sins, we had a chance at heaven. In this room, I was admonished to pay tithing, say my prayers, attend the temple, conduct family home evening, do my family history, perform service projects, wear my sacred undergarments night and day, and make a happy home for children growing in the gospel. The pictures in Church magazines of well-groomed families in their muted living rooms did not appeal to me. There had to be a way to

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1. Judith L. Brutz, *In the Manner of the Lord's Prayer*, quoted in *Plain Living: A Quaker Path to Simplicity*, edited by Catherine Whitmire (Notre Dame, Ind.: Sorin Books, 2001), 78.

make a home that felt alive and real, but I had no idea how to go about this. Week after week, I went to church and listened to the usual requirements for perfection. In this room, I heard that some day Christ would separate the wheat and tares, the sheep and goats, the ones who followed meekly and the ones who “kicked against the pricks.” Like me. I came home fuming every week. Kent didn’t like to hear such “prideful” words from me. He wanted to protect his testimony of the Church. I shut my mouth and cried in the bathroom, night after night. The tub became a bowl to hold my splitting self.

Ten years later, I had had enough. Kent and I had moved across the country and then returned to Salt Lake City. Our boys were two and almost five. Kent had found his passion as a public defender, and I my own as a writer and musician. I’d done my duty in the Church, and while I loved the people I associated with, I could no longer say that I believed in Mormon doctrine. I felt that I was being kept in an eternal childhood, told in soothing tones what to believe and how to act. I was tired of living in a church that made me so preoccupied with my own righteousness—or lack thereof—that I had never learned to care about the world. And worst of all, I didn’t feel that I could speak my mind or heart at church. Kent knew all this. His work had shown him how an institution based on power can do damage to the soul; and while he hadn’t given up his testimony of the Church, he had at least become a Democrat. He’d also learned to listen to my ranting after church without the wall of judgment I had felt in our first years together. So when I told him that I’d like to go to Quaker meeting, just to see what it was like, he didn’t shut me down. He listened. He held his breath, holding a space for me. He knew my Mormon days were over. Slowly, with many long pauses, he told me he’d support me, if I’d do the same for him.

That conversation was only the beginning. It had been easy to cry in the bathroom and then tell Kent that I was fine when I came out. It had been easy to rant about the Church in private and then smile falsely as I taught what I did not believe. It was harder to tell Kent, “I love you but can’t go to church with you.” And it was even harder, a month later, to inform our Mormon bishop, “I love the people in our ward, but I can’t stay here and be honest with myself.” As I became acquainted with the Salt Lake Friends, I saw that, although Quakers have no formal creed, they try to walk the walk of truth and peace. These values often seem to contradict each other. Living in the open space between them takes more grace and

courage than I have sometimes. A Friend quoted a traditional Quaker proverb in Meeting recently: “Quakers are known for speaking truth to power. But I believe the whole phrase is ‘Speak truth to power with love.’” Or, as Muriel Bishop puts it, “Truth without love is violence. And love without truth is sentimentality. We do need both.”<sup>2</sup> In our marriage and in the relationships that surround it, Kent and I are learning the balance of plain speech and peacemaking that Quakers try to live by. The culture of niceness still hangs on me like a film of lace. It still takes nerve for me to say exactly what I feel. To name my hurt or loneliness, and do it without blame, may take a lifetime to learn well.

Our first steps into interfaith marriage felt like waking from an anesthetic. Day after day, we let out words we’d been too scared to say. They often hurt on the way out, and yet we found new energy in saying them. Kent asked me once, “Do you believe in God at all?” I looked at him and answered, “I don’t know. Not in the white-robed, white-haired sense, at least. But I believe that there’s a spark of good in all of us.” He swallowed hard and tried to take this in. We talked about the afterlife, our temple covenants, and what would happen to our sons. We talked about our families and how they would respond to my decision. At the same time, Kent was trying Prozac, hormone therapy, and sleep aids to relieve his deep, inherited depression. At one point, we sat on the couch and dared to utter words like “separation” and “divorce.” Once we’d spoken them, we could attend to what these words might mean for us, our children, and our families.

We chose to stay together. We went to see my therapist. She spoke a word that’s helped us more than any other: “structure.” She said, “Create a time and space each day to check in with each other.” This sounded obvious, but when we heard it, we knew we had work to do. At night we’d found ourselves at odds: Kent was still depressed and panicked if I wrote for long hours after our boys were asleep. We were literally passing in the night. After several years of medication, therapy, and couples work together, we have found a way to balance time together with the time I need to work. Now, as soon as we have put the boys to bed, we sit together and review the day. We relax into the space we’ve made down in the family room. We sit on the sofa that we called the Story Couch in our old house, the place that still holds stories from our early marriage until now. Kent

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2. Muriel Bishop, quoted in *Plain Living*, 146.

turns off the TV. The cat curls up between us. The dog arrives and noses us. I'm learning not to let my mind run off into the project waiting on my laptop. We talk about our boys, our spiritual communities, Kent's work, my questions about how to spend my time. When we release the space we've made, Kent doesn't mind my going back to work, and I no longer feel ashamed of my creative trance. This is radical home-making: not the soft-focus living room but a space that can be anywhere, a bowl to hold the pieces of our lives.

On Sundays, we make time to talk together as a family after church. The boys jump on the bed, we interrupt each other, and our pets get tangled in the conversation. The boys tell us what happened in their classes; Kent reports on who bore testimonies during fast meeting or asked questions during Sunday School; I tell about the vocal ministry in Quaker Meeting or about the silence that helped me work through a problem. Sometimes we go deep into a troubling subject, such as Mormon views on homosexuality. Our sons are learning that their parents may not see the world through the same lens but that it's possible to love each other anyway.

Some conversations rise up unexpectedly and call us to attention: *Hold a space for this*. Our son Anders came upstairs one night, appalled because he'd found R-rated DVDs down in the family room. "How dare you!" he intoned. He was only nine but well aware of Mormon standards for dress, media, and drink.

"What matters is a movie's quality, not just what it's rated," I responded.

"Hm!" he said, and tossed his head. "There might be a good message, but you can get the same thing in a movie without all that icky stuff."

"But movies aren't just about messages. Some films are works of art. Some help you see the world in a new way."

"Now it's *Mystic River*. What next? Wine? Spaghetti straps? NC-17?"

"Now do you really think that people who drink wine or wear spaghetti straps are bad? What do you think is more important—what we wear or whether we can treat each other kindly?"

"Both!" he cried, eyes flashing.

Kent came in and said, "Now I believe in following the prophet, but I understand where Mom is coming from. There are good movies out there that may be R-rated, and sometimes ratings are misleading anyway."

I added, my voice rising, "There are really stupid PG-rated movies, too."

"Evan," said Kent to our seven-year-old, who sat twirling his noodles at the other end of the table, "do you know what we're talking about?"

"Oh, yeah," he said. "The ego and how it can make people fight."

We sat in silence for at least ten seconds. How did he remember our discussion of the ego, months before? How did he perceive the pride in us tonight? I sat back in my chair and wondered what my boys would learn from me, or not. I still wonder. Though we read a "spiritual story" every night, whether *Stone Soup* or a picture book on Gandhi, soon my boys will have to choose their lives. That's what I want most for them, really, to become themselves. One might remain a Mormon and the other turn to Buddhism. They both might stay or go. One might protest war; the other might decide he still loves lethal weapons and sign up to serve. A mystery. I didn't try to solve it when my son discovered *Mystic River* on the shelf. Instead we went downstairs together and watched *Master and Commander*. Anders protested the PG-13 rating, then forgot his argument amid the ship's groans and the ocean's swells. By movie's end, both boys were asking "Will the captain let his friend go?" and "Will he get his specimens?" as if their lives depended on the answers.

Several months later on a trip to San Diego, our family visited the ship used in filming *Master and Commander*. We'd been listening to Marshall Rosenberg's CDs on nonviolent communication in the car; and while we'd learned a lot about voicing our truth without aggression, the boys were ready to burst from so much wisdom imparted from an invisible speaker. They ran up and down the deck, looking for anchors and cannons. They turned the ship's wheel with gusto. Down below, we saw the captain's quarters with Russell Crowe's costume on display. Recorded string music filled the small walkway where we stood; there were the cello and violin the captain and the doctor had used in their more peaceful scenes together. I pictured these fictional friends, the man of war and the man of science, making music in their temporary, floating bowl. Later that day my family went sailing on the Pacific with my father, all our differences balanced for a while on the rocking water. We sat in silence for most of the trip, not an awkward silence but a gentle yielding to each other's presence.

It's one thing to accept religious difference in my family. It's been another matter to confront the anger and bewilderment around us.

When I first left the Church, we had a meeting with Kent's family that erupted into slamming doors and trembling voices. Kent's parents had had no idea what I really thought and felt about the Church. His family loves him fiercely and came rushing to defend him, even as he did the same for me. Since then, we've talked more gently with each other. My sister-in-law said, not long ago, "We don't know what to do with you. You stopped going to church and yet you haven't left your kids, you're comfortable around us, and you still have Mormon friends. You don't fit in the usual box."

My parents, who've had their own struggles with the Church, were not surprised at my decision. Others in the family have been deeply disappointed. Some have chosen to engage with me in conversation; others have pretended nothing's changed. I was surprised and hurt when a beloved uncle breezily dismissed my memoir *Grace Notes*—and even more surprised weeks later when he said, "I need to apologize to you. I found myself turning into my patriarchal father." A cousin's told me that my story sounds exactly like her own. It's taken more resilience than I knew I had to make room for these varied, personal responses.

When my memoir started circulating in our neighborhood, the rumors started swirling, too. The bishop had to field a number of "concerns" brought to his office. He found no reason to enact Church discipline—despite the worry of an outgoing stake president. When I met with the new stake leader, the youngest in the Church but well-traveled and willing to listen, I spoke without apology. I was amazed to hear him say that he respected my decision. I still appeared in church once every month, as painful as this was, to show that even an "apostate" had a face my neighbors recognized. Though some responses hurt me, most of my friends in the ward remained as close to me as ever. And even though my family's moved into another neighborhood, more because of growing boys than out of fear of gossip, we have stayed in touch. Some of these friends have even started to confide their own religious doubts and struggles in a culture of conformity.

When I first made my break with Mormonism, Kent faced sympathy on every side. Many people were convinced I'd trampled his eternal hopes. I felt the pain of this as well: If Kent believed his exaltation hung on covenants we'd made together in the temple, then I'd broken the contract and he'd be a lone man in the celestial kingdom. Sometimes, after taking in a flood of sympathy at church, Kent would come home weighted



down. "I don't want people to feel sorry for me," he would say. "It makes me doubt what we're doing, which I know in my heart is right." Sometimes he'd add, "What do they want me to do? Divorce you?" His answer now, when people question him, is that he doesn't know what to expect in the next life, but he has faith that things will work out for our good. He also teases me about the "other wives" he may be given as a consolation prize. He speaks with confidence that what we've chosen isn't a mistake. He also speaks with gentleness.

Now, when I sit in a Mormon Church and watch a group of men get up to bless my husband, I feel foreign and at home at the same time. I know the language spoken here. I know that other women in the room will not say, "Why can't I join in?" Although I'm tempted to say this myself, just to make people aware of what they take for granted, I don't. Maybe I lack courage; maybe I don't need to preach to others about what I think is right. I hope my choice to move toward a new spiritual life speaks for itself, even when I join with Mormons in a pastel room. What I really want to do is hold a space for Kent and for our boys, for his family and for mine, as we make room for each other in our noisy house. Sometimes I wonder if the act of showing up may be enough.

The day of Kent's ordination as a high priest, we hosted a gathering for both our families in our house. Kent's family sat together in the living room. Mine gravitated toward the kitchen. Though both sides get along and feel affection for each other, I also felt unspoken judgment crackling back and forth from room to room. This was the weekend following the Bush-Kerry election. One could say our families formed a microcosm of the cultural divide that dominated current headlines: "religious conservatives" versus "skeptical seekers," "down-to-earth folk" versus "educated elite," et cetera. But there were other complications: my sister who enjoys making caustic comments in a crowded room; my brother-in-law, bishop of his ward in Idaho, so diligent he never rests, who had come down with shingles; a nephew who gets so unnerved in social situations that he called ahead to make sure he arrived exactly when the food was served. I understood his feelings. As our families met with slight unease around the table, my whole body shook with tension. I fretted over forks and napkins. I could not sit down. I snapped at my sister for asking where a bowl was. Later, when I told my father what an awful hostess I had been, he said, "It's no small thing to get us in one room at all." He was right, but maybe next time I can think more consciously about the space I make for us. I

can show up, yes, but also recognize the hot point of convergence. I can meditate beforehand. I can hold our families in the Light, as Quakers do, remembering the worth of every person.

In our marriage, Kent and I attempt to do this for each other. I know he's loyal to the Mormon creed, even if he has private doubts sometimes. He believes if he has faith and follows what he's told to do, the cloudy things will all come clear some day. I disagree but can respect his feelings. Kent understands that I no longer have a firm belief in the atonement or the afterlife, let alone the three degrees of glory. He finds this very sad but sees how my life grows more vibrant as I learn to love the here and now. These days, our hardest conversations may seem trivial compared to questions of the Great Beyond, and yet I sometimes think they teach us more.

Several months ago, I came home from my book club hot with tears. The other women in the group had talked about their partners and their husbands, how instinctively connected they had been from the beginning, how they worked together, how they read each other's minds. I thought of Kent at home, watching his beloved Yankees on TV. I remembered how I'd broken up with him in college when I realized that he didn't like to read. I wondered if, for all his kind support of me, he'd really thrive with some nice Mormon girl who liked to go to ballgames.

Back at home, I shut myself in the bedroom. I cried long and hard. Were we missing something? I shared books and music with my close women friends, but should I try to share them with my husband, too? Should I be paying more attention to the baseball scores? How could we find true reciprocity? I didn't know. I started leafing through the books on the low shelf in front of me. One was Margaret Wheatley's *Turning to One Another*. I flipped to a page that held only three lines of writing: "It's not our differences that divide us. It's our judgments about each other that do."<sup>3</sup>

I sat back on my heels. Here I'd been, crying in solitude as I had done so many times before, and feeling powerless to act. My life was not as impossible as I believed. So we were different. So Kent liked to watch a game on TV after work. Even my closest friend and I were opposite in more ways than we were alike. Our differences had drawn us toward each

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3. Margaret Wheatley, *Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2002), 47.

other. There was nothing wrong with this. But if I started thinking Kent would never understand me or I him, we'd be in trouble.

I pulled myself up and walked downstairs. I sat down on the sofa next to Kent. We'd talked before I left for book club, and he seemed surprised to see me. "Can we talk some more?" I said.

"About what?"

"Well, I wonder if we should be doing more together."

"Aren't we fine the way we are?" This from the man who, in the depths of depression, could not bear for me to go out in the evening without him.

I told him what the women in my book club had described. He asked me which ones in particular; I realized there were only two who'd spoken rapturously about their relationships. The women without kids. One had lived with her new partner for six months. I leaned back, relieved, and we kept talking. No, we didn't have to grow more like each other. Quaker/Mormon, poet/lawyer, singer/baseball fan, we realized that we spanned a world between us.

Soon our conversation turned to other people in our lives. Kent described the tenderness he'd felt when seeing an old friend that day. I found words to tell him more about my own close friend and the childhood hurt she's helped to heal in me. Soon I found myself confiding more about my vulnerable self. Words formed that I'd never thought I'd utter. Kent received them gently, asked more questions, and I found that I felt safe enough to answer. "I didn't realize that there's always more to say," I told him as we faced each other on the sofa.

"Truthfulness anywhere means a heightened complexity," writes Adrienne Rich in her 1975 essay "Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying." This essay addresses women's relationships with each other, but I often read it when preparing to speak truth to my husband, to my friend, to my mother, or to a person who's offended me. Rich goes on, "It isn't that to have an honorable relationship with you, I have to understand everything, or tell you everything at once, or that I can know, beforehand, everything I need to tell you. It means that most of the time I am eager, longing for the possibility of telling you. That these possibilities may seem frightening, but not destructive, to me. That I feel strong enough to hear

your tentative and groping words. That we both know we are trying, all the time, to extend the possibilities of truth between us.”<sup>4</sup>

When the Quaker William Penn wrote, “Let us then try what love will do,”<sup>5</sup> he was speaking to the question of brute force. He meant these words as an experiment, to test love as a softener of enmity. But even in what Adrienne Rich calls “an honorable relationship,” our judgments can make enemies of lovers. My husband and I lived in this cold war for years. And then, when I approached him about leaving Mormonism, he decided to try love. I tried it back, and we’re still in the laboratory, every night when we sit down together on the couch.

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4. Adrienne Rich, “Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying,” in her *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966–1978* (New York: Norton, 1979), 185.

5. William Penn from his *Some Fruits of Solitude*, Part 1, Maxim #545, 1693, quoted in *Faith and Practice* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, 1997), 172.