

Project ZION Podcast: Extra Shot Episode 24
Tom Morain

Hello, my name is Tom Morain, and for the purposes of this little recording, I think I would like to describe myself as a recovering seeker. I was a seeker, I think, long before anyone was using the word or we had any concept that went along with it. But many things that I hear about seekers today, I can identify with from my days back in the 1970's as a young husband, father of two, with some religious questions of my own. Today, I am an Evangelist in the Community of Christ and I'd like to tell you my story.

I'd like to frame my story in two symbols, that will be familiar to all of those of you who have grown up in some Joseph Smith tradition. The first is the rod of iron that appears in the Book of Mormon in a dream. The scene was that people who had deep religious faith were urged to grab onto the rod of iron, hang fast to those deep convictions that you know are true and don't let anything move you from them. That's good to have those rod of iron beliefs in your life. But the second one is also an image from the Book of Mormon. It's the Liahona. When the Nephites were going to leave in their underwater boats and were wondering "how are we going to find our way across the ocean?", the story says that God provided them with a special compass. It wasn't a magnetic compass, but if you had faith, one of the arrows would point you in the direction you were supposed to go. I've always had a little ornery thought "it's good that God didn't give them a magnetic compass, because if they're holding onto the rod of iron, that magnetic compass is going to be thrown off because it's too close to that iron! But God said "no, the compass will work if you have faith" and they were encouraged to have that faith as they entered into the boats.

I think that those two symbols really frame my story. There is a tension between those two. Sometimes, deeply held religious beliefs don't seem to fit. You need to reexamine them. Do they really mean what we've always thought they would mean? I like a phrase that philosopher Eric Frome came up with because I really think that's something we need to consider in our spiritual journey. Frome said "thinking man is always uncertain. Free men are always insecure." And of course, he would refer to both men and women in that, but when he wrote it, that was the way you expressed it. But thinking man is always uncertain. If you're thinking, if you're analyzing, you haven't come up with your final answer. So thinking men are uncertain. Free men are always insecure. As long as you are free, there's always the possibility that something will come along and take away your freedom. So the idea of insecurity and freedom...we want security. We want answers that we can believe in with all

our hearts, and that idea that there is a tension between having a firm beliefs and being open to newness may cause some anxiety. I know it did for me and I suspect it does for many others.

So let me tell you my story and see if there are any points where we might have something in common.

I was raised in a small Iowa town. My father was a Baptist. He was the newspaper editor, and my mother was a Reorganized Latter Day Saint. We went, the kids - my three brothers and sister and I went every other Sunday with mom or with dad, so we just alternated between the two churches. We didn't think it was unusual and we certainly felt no tension. My parents were really classy in that they did not make their children prizes in some kind of war of religions. They respected each other's religion even though they might not have believed every thing about it. But between them, they gave us a pretty strong Christian background, and I appreciate that. I think probably, when I look back on it, I was more Baptist-flavored when I was growing up, and if I had to describe my Baptist upbringing, the main thing that Baptists were worried about was avoiding hell. You don't want to go to hell, you want to get heaven...and that's good, but what you *really* don't want to do is go to hell, so you don't do bad things. My Baptist grandmother had a long list of things you don't do and I think at times her favorite word was "don't" because we got a pretty scary list of things we were not supposed to do. If I had to describe how I grew up thinking about God - God was a bookkeeper that we would encounter eventually, and with certainty, we would encounter Him and He would have a list of the good and bad things we did. If you had too many bad things, or some really bad things on the list, you were probably going to go to hell, so that wasn't something you were supposed to look forward to. Remember that little song we sometimes sang in kindergarten?

So be careful little feet, where you walk.

Be careful little feet, where you walk.

For the Father up above, He is looking down in love.

So be careful little feet, where you walk.

Now that really doesn't seem like a loving father image to me, but it was a pretty potent reminder that God is always watching and He knows what you're doing. He knows if you've been bad or good so be good for goodness sake. God and Santa Claus in that respect had a lot in common. But I don't want to put

down the Baptist people I grew up with. They were good people. They saw life as a test. The object is to save yourself. Be saved. We sang a lot of hymns about being saved and *we are washed in the blood* and salvation is the most glorious thing to which we can aspire. Not very much in the Baptist faith that I remember about establishing justice, feeding the hungry, ending poverty. Those weren't things in this world that they were concerned with. This world was about a test - would you get to heaven or not? I don't mean to, again, put them down. They led good lives and I respected and loved a lot of those people in the Baptist church.

But in summer, we went to the RLDS Reunions and those were different. God, in prayer meetings and testimonies, was very real. He was active in the lives of the people. The Holy Spirit was often giving them advice, helping them with problems, being a very present comfort in times of need. God was active in healings and how much the church sacraments had meant in their lives. There was a hunger in those prayer meetings for closer encounters with the Holy Spirit, with God. I didn't hear that in the Baptist church. I wasn't really paying a lot of attention. I wasn't uncomfortable growing up or I didn't have an outrageous fear of hell, I guess. I didn't think I was doing anything really terribly bad at the time, and probably, if they graded on a curve, I'd be at least half-way up - at least that was my hope. But I was exposed to people who had a religious hunger at those RLDS Reunions and I remember feeling that was something different than I got through the year.

When it was time to choose a college, I chose Graceland. I had two older brothers who went to Graceland and many in my mother's family had been Gracelanders. A long tradition of Graceland College, before it became Graceland University. I had a very good freshman year. I made a lot of good friends, in fact, the friends I made my freshman year at Graceland became some of my best and lasting friends throughout the rest of my life, and I'm very appreciative of those friendships. At the end of my freshman year, I asked for baptism into the RLDS church. I wanted to have those people in my life, the people I had met. I admired their spirituality and I wanted to be with those people, hoping that they would prod me at times to develop a stronger spiritual life. If I look back now, I'm aware I knew RLDS theology, or at least the major outlines. I could talk a good game, but that wasn't what was important to me. It was being with those people. I wanted to be with those people and have them in my life and that was really what I was baptized into. It was not an affirmation of all the RLDS theological distinctives.

I met my wife at Graceland. We married when we graduated from college and after grad school, we moved to Ames, where we had two sons and become

active in the Ames congregation - and we *were* active. I played the piano, taught Sunday school. We kept our kids in Sunday school. We went to Reunions faithfully, and continued to be good friends with the Ames congregation and our Graceland friends as well. But I noticed that I began to feel a tension, as I listened to the Sunday school lessons, as I listened to the sermons, I knew that outside of Sunday morning, I wasn't really a believer in a lot of those theological distinctives. The idea of spiritual authority that the church was claiming for itself rather exclusively. The emphasis on priesthood power, and certainly on church history. Church history was a big stumbling block for me. I was a history major in grad school, and I was learning historical method. But when you got to church history, the rules were that you didn't apply economic or social pressures, or political influences. Things happened because God said "this is what I want" and you didn't question that. You didn't study church history the way you studied other history, in fact, if you did, it was looked upon with concern that you weren't faithful and willing to believe the story as it had been handed down to you. That anxiety began to grow. I became more and more disaffected, but let's keep it in perspective. I wasn't a rebel and it wasn't disrupting my sleep by any means. But I was aware that what people saw on the outside wasn't what was going on in my head.

I realized I had three options. I could keep silent, sit there in the pew and stay active in the congregation. I could speak up and question those beliefs and in doing so, I was pretty sure I would upset the good saints of my congregation and those people who were also my good friends. Or I could leave...and we hadn't really considered leaving. My wife's family was very strong in the church. Her father was a church appointee, a stake president, had been a lifelong appointee. We didn't want to create those ripples either. So I was sort of wondering what my future was going to be. And then in the early 1970's I attended my first John Whitmer Historical Association conference - a group of church historians and people interested in history. People who had also some questions about church history, about church in general, would come together once a year and hear history papers and discuss ideas about the church. One of the first papers that I heard was an amazing historical analysis by church historian Jan Shipps. She was not either Mormon or RLDS, in fact, she was a Methodist, but she had made a study of Mormonism her professional emphasis and so she was sort of our "outsider" who could tell us the truth without threat of retribution from church authorities. Her paper was on extra-rational ways of knowing that Joseph believed in. It wasn't that he was making things up or he was lying when he said "this is what I believe God is telling us to do." He believed that the inspirations he had, the dreams that he had, the thoughts he had, were being sent by God, that he was prophet, and therefore, his thoughts were God's thoughts on religious matters...or God's thought were his thoughts,

depending on which side you were looking at it. But anyway, it was a psychological analysis of Joseph's way of knowing that really opened up my mind to the possibility that someone could do this to Joseph Smith.

It was a whole new world, and what it said was you don't have to shut off the thinking process as your graduate training when you're looking at history. You can bring all of that to a study of history. In fact what it was saying was "let's look at that Liahona...where is the Holy Spirit leading you in a search for better answers? Can you move out in faith and using the best tools that you have, the best talents that God has given you and bring those to the study of religion and church history?" Before those had been shut off because if you're questioning, it sounds like you're weak in the faith. But this conference, the history papers I heard, said that religion requires the very best that you've got. You don't shut that down. You strive to get the best answers that you can. But along with that, you're not just disproving the old formulas - to say the way the early church people taught their church history or believed it, or took everything that Joseph said at face value as coming from God - just to prove that wrong, or say we don't believe that anymore, isn't enough. You have to replace that with something better, and that took a while to get to that point. Can we dispense, can we say, we're going to move past the old into uncharted waters, not just to disprove the old, but to come up with the very best formulas, the very best basis for beliefs that we can? In other words, the purpose of the Liahona is to lead you to new beliefs that you can grab onto as rods of iron that will sustain you in your spiritual journey. But there is that tension between the two - conviction that you have something that's right and the willingness to move into new territory when you feel that you need to reexamine. That for me was the first time that religion and church history really became exciting. It's ok to question faith. It is not a loss of faith to do that, and when you can do that, supported by people who are also on a similar quest, it can be exhilarating, and for me, that decade of the 1970's and 1980's really was an opening up to the possibility that there is a place for questing in my life, and searching for good religious answers.

What I didn't know was that the RLDS church was going through many of the same growing pains at an institutional level that I was going through at a personal level. Many in the church were still holding on so fast to that rod of iron, things that they had been taught by their parents and their grandparents as eternally true, a view of Joseph Smith as an unquestioned prophet of God, those things they were not ready to give up, and challenging to them through church officials was a very painful and disruptive process. I respect the pain that they were going through because I too had experienced some of that. But what I know now when I look back is that I could not have stayed in the church

with the theology that I had lived with in my Graceland days, or that I had grown up with. If the church had not changed - had not been willing to explore its own sense of beliefs and had said "we have the truth and we're not going to re-examine it in light of new evidence" - I could not have stayed. At some point, I would have said, "this just isn't me." But what I can also affirm is that throughout, I could journey with fellowship of people that I had first met in the church. The people that I respected, the people that I wanted to be with - the same way when I was first baptized - realization that here are people who have something authentic in a quest for a deeper spirituality. I still want to be with those people. Those are the people that I want to have in my life. They are not all in the Reorganized Latter Day Saint church, and now the Community of Christ. They can be in any faith walk. But that intensity and that desire to deepen their spirituality, I want to be surrounded by those people, who will lift me up, who will nudge me in that same direction. I also appreciate that I'm in a church that will allow me to ask those questions, that will support me in my spiritual growth. We won't always agree, but we can learn from different perspectives.

In my job, I sometimes serve on book evaluation committees, what's the best book of the year, I read grant proposals and have to come up with a ranking of which grants deserve funding. When I was first on those committees and you brought your rankings to the start of a meeting, I was afraid that mine would look different from everyone else's and they would all be in agreement and mine would be different and somehow that would be a bad reflection on me. I look forward to the diversity that comes in on rankings because I find over and over others saw things in a grant proposal, or a book or an article, that I missed. They saw it through a different lens and listening to them, I discover things that I too can profit from hearing about. So we can learn from those different perspectives and I am glad, in fact, I depend on being in a church that allows for that diversity, that gives me different perspectives, but yet will support me in my own religious quest. We still want those rods of iron in our life. We want those convictions, where we can say, like Martin Luther, here I stand, I can do no other. One of the convictions is I want those people who have that same sense of questing to be a part of my life. I need them to keep me hungry for a deeper relationship. If I can be surrounded by them, I am more willing to trust the Liahona that says, if there's a new idea, is it worthwhile to explore? Can I let go of some of my old perspectives and trust that surrounded by people who are also on a spiritual journey, that together, we can come up with better answers than I could ever do by myself? That takes courage, and I still understand the tension between rods of iron and Liahonas, and I think we all probably have those moments of tension in our life. But I am thankful that I am surrounded by people who will support me, who will differ from me, and

who will share those different perspectives with a concern for my growth, and not just proving themselves right.

May we support each other in our spiritual journeys. Thank you.