



Tender
LEAVES
of
HOPE

Finding Belonging
as LGBTQ
Latter-day Saint
Women

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Chapter One

GROW AS WE GO

I am a woman who is attracted to women. I am also happily married to an amazing man. We have children and grandchildren together, and we are “all in” concerning our covenants and church service. People in our stake might be surprised to know we have not lived a life of spiritual ease.

I’ve served as Relief Society president, temple ordinance worker, seminary teacher, Primary president, institute teacher, and in various stake callings and presidencies. I support my husband, David, in his demanding leadership callings. We have five daughters and fifteen grandchildren. We’ve done our best to teach them the gospel of Jesus Christ. I’ve studied, prayed, and fasted. I have deep faith in the Atonement of Jesus Christ. I trust in His mercy and love.

I am still attracted to women.

Ten years ago, I was hiding that truth from everyone, including myself. My denial was so strong that I could answer questions in seminary about same-sex attraction without even a thought for my own complicated feelings. I created firewalls between the life I wanted to live and my continuing magnetic pull toward women, and I didn’t allow conscious thought past those firewalls. I didn’t see how my deep faith and my attraction to women could coexist. So I did everything I could to ignore and bury my same-sex attraction. I was doing the best I knew how, but this coping strategy took a terrible toll on my mental health and my relationships with my family and with God.

I have now opened up about my feelings for women, the feelings I desperately hid for most of my life. It is a profound seismic shift, one I would never have imagined. What could create such a change? Only love: the confidence and peace that comes from feeling and believing the love of my Heavenly Parents and my Savior; the love and acceptance I feel for myself; the love and trust I feel from my family and my friends; and the love and compassion I feel for those I don’t yet know who feel alone and scared.

Perhaps you are in the midst of this tortuous and terrifying and immensely rewarding journey. I don’t want you to have to do it alone. I wish I could sit next to you and share my story. I’ll do that in the pages to come—I’ll share with you the events that brought me to this place of love, peace, empathy, and delicate balance. My life isn’t a road map for anyone else, but perhaps you will find something useful for your situation. I’ll discuss the concepts that enlightened my understanding, as well as my deepening appreciation of

the nature of God, His plan for my growth, and the wondrous ways I see Him working in my life. I will also share the insights of more than forty women, all Latter-day Saint and LGBTQ¹, who are motivated by love to share what they have experienced and learned.

I'm ready to come out of hiding because I want to share what I've learned. I am mostly free from the shame that crushed me for years. I know my attraction for women will not disappear as a reward for good behavior, and I don't want it to. I don't want to lose the gifts that accompany my orientation toward women. I also know that, while I can't decide to change my sexual orientation, I *can* decide how I respond to the circumstances of my life. Those responses are not the answers on my final exam. I'm nowhere near the end of the semester. I'm still actively learning, taking pop quizzes, correcting what I misunderstood, and trying an answer and finding it's not the one I really want. I am moving toward greater internal harmony and external unity with my family, faith community, and God.

I recognize I had placed a box of imposed expectations around God. My assumptions limited my full experience of His love, patience, creativity, and desire for me to learn. I often find myself repeating to myself, "God said, 'Surprise!'" I've learned He values growth over a perfect test score, and that is both frightening and humbling. It changes my perspective of His Plan of Happiness, and it reminds me I am a child growing into a godly inheritance, not a servant simply meeting obligations and fulfilling duties. I am learning from my experience to understand and emulate the true nature of God. I have more questions and less certainty, and it surprises me to realize this is forward movement on the covenant path.

I used to be scared of my attraction to women being discovered, of losing my family and possibly my faith, and of giving up control of my life and being at the mercy of forces I didn't choose. I was fragmented, fractured into pieces: my faith, my family, my shame over attractions I didn't understand—all colliding with each other in such fearful ways that I did all I could to compartmentalize them.

Today, I know that I am an agent who acts, not a passive player who is "acted upon" (2 Nephi 2:14). Most importantly, I'm not alone in this. I know that God is deeply involved in the lives of His LGBTQ children, wherever they are on their journey through mortality. For many of them, personal revelation is the norm, not the exception. They find that God is generous with His guidance and comfort. I'm no longer fearful of watching my family or my faith slip away. I can choose my own path forward. I also know, from lived experience revealing the deepest desires of my heart, what I will choose.

I feel a profound optimism for LGBTQ members of the church and those within their sphere of influence. When I talk to the many gay women who have come out of hiding to tell their story, I see how their openness is affecting their family, friends, and ward family who can grow into a suspension of judgment and an increase of Christ-like love. As they open up to others, LGBTQ Latter-day Saints may experience healing, greater trust in many relationships, a release of shame, and improved mental health. Their openness creates opportunities for healing and growth among everyone involved. Could this be one way the Lord is preparing His people for His return—a way to help us increase in the kind of love that is less conditioned on social conformity or rigid interpretations and more focused on the pure love of Christ? Elder D. Todd Christofferson taught:

First, and crucial for the Lord's return, is the presence on the earth of a people prepared to receive Him at His coming. . . . The Prophet Joseph Smith stated, "We ought to have the building up of Zion as our greatest object." We build up Zion in our homes, wards, branches, and stakes through unity, godliness, and charity.²

One of my daughters is queer, and I belong to a Facebook group for parents of Latter-day Saint LGBTQ children. I consistently see parents express their gratitude for a deeper and more unconditional love for their child. That no-strings-attached love often develops as they grapple with their own feelings about their child's orientation or gender identity. Perhaps we are becoming a more righteous people because we are becoming more loving, patient, and merciful—more like our Heavenly Parents. As one mother of two LGBTQ children stated, "*We're building love like no generation has ever seen before.*"

Though there may be some parallels among us, my journey is not the roadmap for all LDS women attracted to women. I would be horrified if someone gives this book to you and says "See, you can do what she did." Nothing about being a Latter-day Saint and LGBTQ is off the rack—everything about our lives is custom-made, tailored for us according to our past, our personality, our circumstances, our opportunities, and, most importantly, our desires. God doesn't force us into becoming something different from our truest selves. He will lovingly and tenderly stay with us as we drop our damaging and false expectations of what we "should" be to become free to discern the true desires of our hearts. I believe God will help us to know ourselves as He knows us.

TRUTHS FOR MY LIFE

Here are some truths that I have discovered along the way, and which you may find helpful. As they say in Twelve Step meetings, take what you need and leave the rest:

- I realize I am not alone.
- I reject the false belief that I am too broken to be acceptable to God.
- I also reject the insinuation that my marriage is doomed to unhappiness and failure.
- I tear down the shame that was the wallpaper of my life.
- I discern, through my lived experience and agency, what matters most to me.
- I continue to integrate my faith with my sexual orientation, moving from dissonance to harmony.
- I realize the power of agency to seek out God's customized tutoring for my specific circumstances.
- I decide how I will respond to the choices before me.
- I accept the responsibility to seek revelation and "Hear Him," rather than outsourcing inspiration and looking to others to tell me what to do.
- I recognize the importance of actually "Hearing Him," rather than imposing my limited expectations of what I *think* He would say.
- I understand that "sexual orientation" refers to much more than sexual attraction—it is a composite of emotional, intellectual, spiritual, aesthetic, and a hard-to-pin-down magnetic pull to another gender and/or person.

- I discover that there are gifts of the Spirit that accompany my multi-dimensional attraction to women.
- I feel love and acceptance at church, which makes it a safe space for me to worship, grow, serve, and be served. The members who go out of their way to make a place for me are bearing living witness of their commitment to a covenant relationship with God and His children.
- I am grateful to see the arm of the Lord revealed as He works in the lives of His children to increase their love for one another.

I discovered a musical equivalent to my experience in Ben Platt's song "Grow As We Go." I hear God encouraging me to stay close to Him, to change next to Him rather than turning away. He makes space for my highs and lows, and He lets me know that I can take the time I need. Growth is a process, sometimes slow and convoluted, and I don't need to race to get to where *I expect* He wants me to be. I can stay near Him as we find my way forward together.

I also see how my husband David and I are able to grow individually, yet not in isolation. We are different, and better, than when we started down this difficult road. David offers me grace and respects my agency—he is willing to walk this unusual road with me. We move ahead side by side, and we don't retreat to our separate corners to figure things out. Neither of us have decided we can't do this anymore. Staying next to one another enables us to learn and give support in the process. I don't know how many people can manage this, but I'm grateful we have come to this place. It took time, patience, a whole lot of work, and miracles.

I hope that, as I share my life with you and insights from others, you will recognize that you are not alone. We are part of a group that is perhaps unenviable but also holy, sanctified by our suffering and faith. And we are known to God.

My expectations of how quickly the Spirit would flee kept me in a place of shame and dread for much of my life. I thought my feelings meant I was broken, tainted, and damaged beyond repair. I believed God was waiting for me to misstep and then would pounce in condemnation. The greatest gift I've received from my attraction to women is an enlightened appreciation of God's patience, tenderness, and mercy as He gently and persistently invites me to expand my understanding, abandon my flawed expectations, and trust Him.

Binary, either/or thinking doesn't fit with the reality of my life or my understanding of God's plan for His children. His plan is big enough to allow space for also/and. I experience romantic feelings for women, AND I am a faithful member of the church. I love my husband deeply, AND I feel attracted to women. God wants me to choose Him though my covenants, AND He will sit with me in my yearning for what is outside the bounds He has set. I can yearn to kiss a woman, AND have His Spirit with me. I no longer feel broken. I don't feel my orientation toward women is a flaw of mortality. I don't feel wrong or deserving of rejection. I don't want God to take this from me, and I don't believe He would.

I also don't want to lose my deep appreciation and love for women, the closeness to my Savior that I've experienced as I have come to Him in my tears and despair, the empathy and compassion I've developed, or the forged and tempered determination to honor my covenants and be faithful to my husband. There is a beautiful part of this

experience that is filled with light and peace and joy. For years, my shame kept me from seeing things as they really are and appreciating these gifts.

I learned, from my lived experience, that the constant in my life is God. Through trial and error, through sin and obedience, through my own experience of good, evil, depression, anxiety, desire, suicidal ideation, attractions, anger, joy, pain, happiness—I know that I *always* come back to Him. He is my center, my comfort, my place. Whatever brings me to Him is good. My covenants create a bond with Christ that I treasure.

If you are reading right now because you have a loved one who is LGBTQ, thank you for your compassion and desire to understand their experience. If you identify as LGBTQ, or wonder if you might, I wish we could sit together. I would ask you to tell me your story, listen, and let you be messy without judgment.

You have a Savior who knows you better than you know yourself, who suffers beside you and who will carry your burdens and enlighten your understanding. He will sit with you in your pain and understand the conflicting, clashing passions inside of you. He has compassion for you, and He will help you if you'll let Him. You are not alone.

Notes for Chapter One

¹ If you are new to this topic, you may wonder what the letters in LGBTQ mean. They represent *Lesbian* for women attracted to women; *Gay*, which originally meant a man attracted to men but now is often used as a casual term for anyone attracted to their own gender; *Bisexual* for people who are consistently attracted to both their own and the opposite gender; *Transgender*, which refers not to sexual orientation but to gender identity and represents people who experience gender dysphoria (feeling they are in the wrong body or were assigned the wrong gender at birth); and *Queer*, a former slur that has been rehabilitated to mean outside of the box of straight and cisgender (“cisgender” or “cis” means the person identifies with the gender assigned at birth). There are many other terms and descriptions that people use for themselves, and as you’ll see later, often people move from one to another to find the right fit. They may also reject any category at all for the complicated reality of their lives.

² D. Todd Christofferson, “Preparing for the Lord’s Return,” *Ensign*, May 2019.

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