

Ex-Communication

Stories can have a profound effect on people. My great-grandfather, Rulon C. Allred, was known for his stories. He was a writer and a poet, as well as a doctor, but more importantly, he was a prophet. I grew up hearing stories of great-grandpa as my grandma told of her childhood. I heard stories from my father and even others in our little community. Rulon Allred was a highly respected man in the Salt Lake community where he had spent most of his life. As the founder and leader of the Apostolic United Brethren, an FLDS sect, he was revered as a man of God who heard directly from God. Those who followed him and his teachings believed him to be the sole possessor of the keys to the priesthood and the one true gospel as laid out in the Mormon Scriptures. Not every FLDS member held those beliefs, however. Each FLDS sect differs in some way. The Kingston group believed their leader, Merlin Kingston, was the real prophet who held the real keys. They also believed that they were called to purity in extreme measures. These measures included consuming only sugar-free, whole, organic foods, no pork—as well as keeping their bloodline pure by marrying their half-brothers and sisters. The Apostolic United Brethren and the Kingstons are the only two that I feel I can speak of with any level of knowledge because I am connected through family to both. In any case, these divisions led to my great-grandfather's death from two women who were members of one of these other sects.

He was shot and killed in his office when my father was only fourteen. I've heard those stories as well. Grandma told me years later that it happened as he began teaching more from the bible than any other teaching. The women felt this was an unforgivable sin against the Mormon faith because Joseph Smith's doctrine and the Book of Mormon were scriptures of the one and only true church. If anyone spoke against the church or anything opposing their fundamental doctrines, they were considered an apostate. His death was justified under their doctrine of blood atonement. This doctrine states that if anyone sins against the church in a way that is deemed unforgivable, then that person must pay for it with his or her own blood. I never knew the extent of Grandpa Rulon's murder or the reasons why he was killed until I was much older.

Although I never personally knew my great-grandpa, I still felt as though I had received some sort of sort of legacy as an inheritance from him. Much of that legacy consisted of stories. I suppose storytelling is in my blood. I've always thought that Mormons made the best storytellers. In order for millions of people to believe that an angel gave you plates of gold that contained an indisputable truth and history, you had to be doing something right. Even though I no longer identify as part of the FLDS community I grew up in, I've realized that you can't cut a tree off at the roots.

Grandma had always kept journals, transcripts, and tapes of her father's teachings. She later wrote a book about him, as did her sister Dorothy. The two had vastly different remembrances of what kind of man their father was. In any case, the teachings that grandma kept were considered prophecies. They became a major backdrop of conversations and bedtime stories for me and my siblings growing up. Sometimes these stories still surface, usually as cautionary tales from my father, when we are living our lives in such a way that is not worthy of the holy inheritance we've been born into.

Dad and Mom would both tell us of his foretelling about the streets of Salt Lake City flowing waist high with the blood of innocent people who will be murdered during the "last days". They spoke often of the world economy failing. The collapse would leave shipping trucks stranded and shelving in every store barren. This would cause much of the violence as people fought to

feed their families. The importance of preparedness and food storage became a major part of the culture in Pinesdale. One of my Grandpa Ted's wives bought a tank that she buried in her back yard full of goods. The tank was about as big as a boxcar and would possibly be able to serve as shelter for their family, should such events occur.

Other stories told of earthquakes that would shake the whole earth, separating California and Florida from the United States, and causing them to fall into the ocean and sink. It was widely believed from these stories that these places are among the most sinful and their destruction would be their penance. Along with earthquakes, there would be floods of biblical proportions. Most nights when these stories were shared, we kids would be left torn whether or not we should go to bed not knowing if we would face nightmares equally as graphic and fearsome. I remember a particular dream from one such night, where my Dad and uncle were crawling through a cave with me and my siblings. The cave was filled with lava and figures in the shadows that we couldn't quite make out. We knew they were there the moment when a spear shot out at my uncle, beheading him. Apart from the dreams, we often wondered if we would even wake at all. The only other option would be to sit listening to my parents talking, in spite of our stomachs twisting into anxious knots.

Even as a child, I was often far too vocal in my opinions for anyone's liking. These stories would often result in tears and stubborn protests on my part. Only when I insisted that Dad was scaring me, would he soften, ever so slightly. He would cease telling stories, but his ever-faithful admonition would be to make sure we were staying close to God and saying our prayers, especially if we didn't want these things to happen. I always wondered what good prayer would do. If these stories were indeed prophecies, didn't that mean that there was no stopping them? I might have had more faith in the lack of fulfillment of these prophecies as a result of my prayers if most of my life hadn't felt like the prayers were directed at the ceiling or some distant temple in Salt Lake City. Up until the point I visited the temple when I was twelve, I wondered if it really existed. With prayer as my only safeguard, I would prattle off some scripted list of what I needed from God, just the way Momma taught me. Once I fell asleep I would wake up hours later screaming. The nightmares were unavoidable.

Years later, I converted to Christianity. I had rejected the majority of the stories I had been taught growing up. After years of dabbling in bible reading and then attending a charismatic church, I realized that the version of God I was shown as a child was vastly different than the one I was shown in the Christian faith. Rejecting a religion and rejecting generations of family history entwined in that religion, on the other hand, are two very different feats.

About the time I was graduating from high school, a friend of my oldest brother Vince gave me a book as a gift. Patrick was a local representative for the Voice of the Martyrs organization. Voice of the Martyrs is a Christian organization that exists with the purpose of shining light on people who are persecuted for their faith. Most of the people that Voice of the Martyrs represents are people from third world countries where there is either state opposition towards Christianity, or there are other oppositions from other faiths such as Islam. Patrick had tried to sell books to raise money for the cause. The book he chose to give me was entitled *I Dared to Call Him Father*, written by a Muslim woman who converted to Christianity and ended up fleeing her home and coming to the United States because of her experiences with religious persecution. I was inspired by her story. I found myself praying one night that God would give me the kind of faith that this woman had. I prayed that He would teach me to trust Him enough to be obedient in the face of fear and the unknown.

A few days after that prayer, Vince came home for a visit. I was in my bedroom reading. It was evident that his purpose in being there was to talk with me. He told me he just came from one of the churches in town and had shared his conversion story with them. Expecting that he wanted me to praise him, I did so, but he brushed it aside. He continued to tell me that he had shared about growing up in Pinesdale, about how the community where my family lived practices polygamy—a practice that is illegal in most states, including Montana. A bold move, but I still wasn't sure why he was so concerned about it until he told me that a couple of the members of the Bishopric—men who were in charge of the priesthood groups in my parent's church—were there in attendance. They had heard that the church was doing a special message to discuss polygamy, so they come to hear what sort of blasphemy or judgment the Christian church would say about them. Instead of the church speaking badly about their polygamous doctrines, it was one of their own.

My mind began racing. I had a lot of questions about what that would mean for him, for us, and what they would do about it. The next thing out of Vince's mouth was:

“Megan, you need to leave. You have to get out of here.”

With a million questions still unanswered, I could feel the tension rising inside of me. I calmly told him that I would go, but I needed at least a couple of days to find a place to live, or at least have a friend that I could stay with for a while, considering my brother didn't have his apartment anymore and was living in a discipleship home for men.

“No, now, Megan. Get whatever you can and come with me. The pastor at the church I spoke at told me you could stay with him and his family for a few days. We can figure it out from there.”

“Vince, I'm not going anywhere until I know that God wants me to.”

It was the only footing I had. My mind was still swimming. I had moved home to help Mom after she was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. At the time, I felt like God wanted me to move back. I wasn't leaving until I was certain my purpose at home was completed. Vince left me alone to pray. Almost as soon as I kneeled at my bedside, I was reminded of the prayer I prayed a few nights prior: *You asked for an opportunity to grow your faith, this is it. Go.*

With this realization came a sense of peace. Here I was facing so many uncertainties, so many unknowns, and yet I had to trust that everything would be okay.

I put on my work uniform and packed up what I could take with me on a few moments notice: my bible, a couple books, a handful of clothes, some music, and a few toiletries. Vince helped me pack up my things and we walked downstairs together to talk with Mom.

Mom met us at the foot of the stairs. She looked at the bag I was carrying, then to me, and back to Vince. I have never seen Mom's face look like it did in that moment. The color faded and her eyes looked as if she were about to cry. When she spoke, her voice was angry.

“What did you do?”

I am uncertain if Mom had been told anything before that moment, but she seemed to know that something was going on, something big. Vince told her about sharing at the church and that two of the members of the bishopric were present. He didn't even get a chance to tell her that I was leaving or any of the details. I saw fire in Mom's eyes and her voice, cold.

“Get the hell out of my house.” She looked over at me, and continued, her voice shaking, “you too! If you are going to be a part of this, then you can go too! Get out both of you!”

Vince and I moved quickly out to his car, the summer sun contrasting the dark, heavy feeling I felt when we were inside. He took me to work and told me he would get my things to the Pastor, who would then pick me up from work and take me to his house where I could stay for the week as needed. “His name is Julian,” Vince told me. “He’s kind of short, with dark hair and a thick beard and has eyes just like Jesus.” Oddly, this description put me somewhat at ease. I half smiled as Vince filled me in on the other details. The family was going out of town the following week, so I couldn’t stay long, but they would help me figure things out in the meantime.

When Julian arrived at the end of my shift, I smiled again at Vince’s accurate description of the man. He had soft eyes and a kind voice. He was very polite and gentle-mannered in every interaction from the time we left the restaurant to the point we arrived at his house. His wife, Laura was equally kind. She was almost taller than Julian with blonde hair and pale skin that contrasted his olive-tone. They made sure I had everything I needed and was put comfortably in a quaint guest room. As I crawled into bed that night, I was too shocked to allow myself to think about everything that had happened that day. I fell asleep almost immediately.

The next morning I awoke in a daze, it took me a moment to recall where I was and what events unfolded the day prior. After breakfast, I told Laura that I wanted to call my mom. I wanted to tell her where I was. I wanted her to know that I was okay so she didn’t have to worry about me. She graciously allowed me to use the phone. She left the room so I could have some privacy.

When my mother answered, her voice was hollow. I told her that I was staying in Corvallis with some people I knew from church and that I was safe. I could hear her crying quietly on the other end of the line.

“How could you do this, Megan?! If you loved your family you wouldn’t have left!!” Her voice broke as she yelled into the phone.

“Mom, I didn’t...”

She continued to yell, cutting off my words. My throat had closed up and I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t speak. What I thought would be an action of respect, felt like a mistake. I knew I couldn’t fight with Mom because I had no voice to do so. I don’t think she would have allowed me the space to speak or the respect to listen to what I might’ve said. I hung up the phone before revealing how weak I truly was.

As quickly as the tears came, Laura was in the room sweeping me up into a motherly embrace. She didn’t say a word, just held me against her chest as I sobbed into her shoulder. Once I found my voice again, I told Laura what had happened and what my mom had said. Laura simply shook her head and told me it wasn’t my fault. Sometimes people do things that we don’t always understand at the time. Eventually, the reasons become clear.

My time spent with the Lopez family was a sanctuary. Most days consisted of conversations that allowed me to process what was happening in my world. They also helped challenge me in my still somewhat new Christian faith. I spent time helping with the kids and playing games of "hide and seek". Julian and Laura gave everything they had to offer. When the week ended, they assisted me in finding a new place to go. I was only eighteen, so the chance of me finding an apartment that was affordable to rent on my own was highly unlikely, especially

on such short notice. As pastors, Julian and Laura found another woman who was willing to allow me to stay with her.

I left my parent's home in mid-July and spent the summer through mid-fall moving from house to house. I couch surfed with friends never staying more than a month in any one place. My friend Kerri had given me a car that had thermostat issues with the condition that I get it fixed up. It wasn't a great car but it worked for getting around. I didn't yet have my driver's license so I had to call my parents in order to get my birth certificate for it. I hadn't spoken to Mom since that day I called after leaving.

Mom spoke cordially to me and agreed to bring me the papers. Much to my surprise, she even offered to take me to my driver's test. This seemed like a turning point. Although I knew I couldn't come back home, she was at least helping me move forward. Having a car and a driver's license didn't change much as far as the living situation went. I had spent a handful of nights in my car when I had nowhere else to go. It was never more than a night or two at a time though. Thankfully, I had enough friends from my church that I usually had a place to crash, even if it was only for a few nights at a time.

One night as I was staying at a friend's house, I reached out to my little brother when I noticed him online at the same time I was. I typed out an affectionate greeting in the online messenger. Louie responded with a simple "Fuck you." I tried to ask him why he was mad, but he never replied. He didn't need to. I knew I no longer had a place in the family. That summer was really challenging. I often felt alone. With every new place I stayed, the weight of every apparent rejection built like a black cloud over me. I can remember numerous nights of crying myself to sleep. I had days when I felt so weighed down and exhausted that it was hard to keep moving forward.

At one point, my friend Stephen's mother had let me borrow a couple historical fiction books about the Mormon Trail. Terry felt like they would benefit me. She told me they might allow me to make some sense of what was going on with my family from their side. The books told a story of a young woman who had converted to Mormonism along their trek to settle in the Utah Valley. It told of her struggles with submitting to her husband and the Mormon law. The main character of the story had refused in the end to be a part of polygamy. This resulted not only in her excommunication from the group but also their attempts to endorse the law of "blood atonement"—a law within the early traditional Mormon church that meant Christ's blood was not sufficient enough to cover the greater sins. Sins such as adultery, murder, apostasy and fornication counted among them.

My hands shook as I turned the pages. Everything I thought I knew of my family, and church community I grew up in, was a lie—a dark one at that. I further researched the history and the laws of the church. I found it wasn't just something written in a novel to entice readers. There is still a question as to whether or not such practices occur today. The Church of Latter Day Saints denies it, although some fundamentalist groups still practice many of the old laws that the church has abolished. Years later, I found out that this doctrine was the same reason my great-grandpa Rulon was murdered. I realized Mom's behavior was largely due to fear. I pitied her. I feared for the rest of my family that remained behind.

Somewhere in the midst of what appeared one massive detour after another, the youth pastor at my church told me of a discipleship home in Frenchtown, Montana. It would mean I had to move and get a job in the Missoula area, but I would have a place to live. I would receive mentorship and bible school training while I was there. Tuition would only be \$460 a month, which included

the rent, utilities, groceries and books needed for the school. I was hesitant at first because I had my heart set on a school in Phoenix. Pastor Carl urged me to apply anyway and see what happened. It wasn't Phoenix, but I would still get the same schooling I wanted, as well as a place to call home.

I filled out the application. It was submitted within a week. I went to Missoula to meet with the house officers, a few interviews with the board, and to apply for possible job opportunities. About a month later, I received the phone call that I was accepted into the program. I gave myself a couple weeks to quit my current job and settle into moving. I went to my parents' home for the first time in months to gather the rest of my things. I told Mom I was moving to Frenchtown for bible school. She raised her eyebrows incredulously at the news.

"Why don't you go to school for something that actually matters... a nurse or a teacher or something?" Her disapproval was clear.

I explained that having a strong foundation in my faith was arguably more important than having some sort of career. I could always pursue a career when I finished with bible school.

"Hmmm..." she replied with her lips pursed. "Well, I guess it doesn't matter what I say, you're going to do it anyways. You always do."

It was evident in that moment that Mom was still salty from everything that had happened earlier in the summer, but she was right too. I have always been a stubborn, headstrong girl. The verdict is still out on which parent gave me that genetic trait.

I moved to Frenchtown with no job offers and a whole lot of unknown in front of me. One thing I knew, I would have a support system and a place to call home. That summer taught me that there are some fights worth engaging. I learned that the best things are not always easy. Perhaps my battles would never really go away but with each challenge comes experience. With each experience comes a renewed sense of strength. That summer taught me what it was like to feel alone, yet still have the support of a whole community behind me. It taught me to have compassion for the stories and experiences of others. Stories can have a profound effect on people. More than anything, that summer taught me that what matters most in life is chasing your peace. Sometimes that looks like doing what appears to be unsafe at the time.