

INTRODUCTION

FALLING OFF THE MOLLY MORMON PEDESTAL



The Truth and Nothing but the Truth

I absolutely love, worship, and adore our Savior Jesus Christ. Every single day, I rejoice in the beautiful truths of His gospel. I also rejoice in my relationship with a loving Heavenly Father and the knowledge that He desires me to live joyfully. Truly, my heart overflows with gratitude for the blessings I receive as an active member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. However, for many years, those were not my sentiments at all. In fact, in many ways, they were quite the opposite.

Even though I had a generally peaceful and safe childhood, during my earliest years, I developed a deeply fearful mindset. Most of my experiences, including the teachings I received about God and the principles of the Church, were processed through the distorting lens of fear. I felt certain that my true self was totally unacceptable, both to other people and to God. As time passed, my misguided perceptions dominated my thoughts, creating an ever-increasing sense of inadequacy in my heart and mind.

The struggle to reconcile my fearful beliefs with the doctrines of faith and hope set forth by the Church increased as I became an adult. Time and time again, I saw myself falling short of

God's many commandments, floundering in the endless stream of counsel that flowed from Church leaders. I was afraid that if other people were aware of my internal struggles, they'd think I wasn't a good Mormon, so I did my best to hide the truth and press on. I tried to compensate for my shortcomings by devoting excessive amounts of time and effort to Church service, but no matter how much I did, I never felt like I had done enough to measure up to God's stringent standards.

Eventually I was given experiences that taught me to see God and the Church through different eyes. My new perceptions were so freeing and joyful that I couldn't help sharing them with anyone who would listen. The more I shared, the more I discovered that I hadn't been alone. Many people, particularly mothers, identified with those same fears and frustrations.

I continued to gratefully share my newfound truths whenever an opportunity presented itself, but I had no desire to write a book. In fact, during the laborious task of revising an article I wrote for an LDS women's magazine,¹ I vowed I would never attempt a book. However, the Lord warns us that His ways are not our ways. Consequently, this book is a part of my humble response to the unrelenting insistence of the Spirit.

Before I plunge into the revealing waters of confession, I must admit that there was never a time when I considered myself good enough to be labeled a "Molly Mormon." It hadn't occurred to me that anyone else might identify me that way either—that is, until the day I went to have my hair cut by a beautician in my neighborhood whom I will call Janet. (Alternate names have been used throughout the book.)

Recent boundary changes had put our homes in the same ward, and I had been called to be the new Relief Society president. Since Janet wasn't very active, I hoped my need for

her haircutting services would open a door of friendship, and perhaps help her feel more comfortable at church. My previous contact with her had been minimal, but a couple of people had warned me that she could be quite abrupt and outspoken, so I entered her salon that day feeling somewhat apprehensive.

However, hair appointments have a way of relaxing minds and loosening tongues. Within moments, we were engaged in an animated conversation that lasted well over an hour. Somewhere between the details of her frustrations with a rebellious teenage daughter and my struggles with a gay son, she suddenly paused to exclaim, “Hey, I think I might like you after all. I thought you were one of those perfect little Molly Mormons who knows nothing about real life, but I can see that I was wrong!”

I burst out laughing. Even before I realized someone had placed me on that precarious Molly Mormon pedestal, I had already fallen off.

Thankfully, I had abandoned my desire to be the perfect “Molly Mormon” much earlier, but for many stress filled years, Molly had been my obsession. And why wouldn’t she be? She was everything I aspired to. She was organized, efficient, and always in control. Not only was she an attentive and charming wife, she was also the mother of several immaculately groomed, brilliantly creative, and perfectly behaved children.

Her home was spotless yet comfortable. She sewed all of her family’s clothing and promptly took care of any mending that needed to be done. Each week she made delicious whole wheat bread, often dropping off a loaf to someone who needed a little extra love or encouragement. She canned hundreds of jars of homegrown fruits and vegetables each summer and generously shared the bounties of her flourishing garden. She served three

delicious, carefully balanced meals every day, and of course she made full use of her ample food storage, which she rotated regularly.

Without fail, Molly got up early each morning, studying the scriptures for at least thirty minutes before going out for an invigorating five-mile run. She magnified her church callings, volunteered at her children's school, worked on family history, and attended the temple every week. She also babysat for her neighbors so they, too, could go to the temple. No matter how much she had to do, she was always calm and pleasant. I could go on listing the virtues of this amazing woman, but I'm sure you already get the picture. Suffice it to say, Molly was absolutely everything I thought I should be.

When people spoke disparagingly of my idol, I felt defensive. Wasn't Molly the perfect disciple of Christ? Didn't she do everything a good LDS woman was supposed to do, always without hesitation or complaint? Personally I envied all those Molly Mormons out there whose praises were sung in *Ensign* articles, sacrament meeting talks, and Relief Society lessons. Obviously they'd already secured their place in the celestial kingdom. When the trumpet sounded, they would walk confidently right through those guarded gates, sit down with their Peter Perfect husbands, and rejoice with their circle of celestial children.

I desperately tried to be like those inspiring Mollies so that I, too, could qualify for that coveted, ultimate blessing *someday*. But I had a huge problem: I couldn't seem to discipline myself enough to conquer even one of the many weaknesses plaguing my life *today*. Furthermore, in spite of my constant nagging—oops, I mean “loving persuasion”—I couldn't get my husband and children to do everything I thought *they* were supposed to be doing, either. Regardless of my frantic attempts to prepare

our family for that marvelous, celestial eventuality, it appeared that none of us were celestial material.

Zealous efforts to increase my worthiness, by magnifying my callings and serving others, were rewarded with lavish praise and sincere appreciation. However, I struggled to appease an ever-mounting sense of guilt, because I often found more pleasure in serving *others* than in attending to the needs of my own family. In spite of my passionate resolve to find a balance, I was always lacking somewhere. Molly's coveted level of perfection remained completely out of my grasp. With such a chasm between my reality and my lofty ideals, it's no wonder I often found myself engaged in a losing battle with depression.

For many long and stressful years, I was unaware of the chokehold the Molly illusion had on my life. I thought I was simply doing my very best to live the gospel. Once I was no longer a prisoner to Molly's deception, I became free to explore the origins of those elusive ideals and the reasons for my misguided drive for perfection.

Some of my earliest memories include being taught that strict obedience to all of God's commandments would bring me happiness, shield me from temptation, and get me into the celestial kingdom after I died so I could live with Jesus and Heavenly Father forever. This devotion to obedience seemed to be the central focus of the people I most trusted, so I firmly set my course to follow every commandment to the letter. The praise I received for knowing and doing what I was "supposed to do" felt wonderful. It really *did* make me feel happy, so keeping that praise rolling in became my urgent desire. I began trying to hide or to somehow compensate for anything that might jeopardize my happiness, my worthiness of praise.

After I became a teenager, one of my Young Women leaders taught a class on goal setting. She said we would be able to reach our goals more readily if we wrote them down and reviewed them daily. I eagerly jumped on the bandwagon, buying brightly colored notebooks, and making copious lists of all the wonderful things I would now be able to accomplish as I worked my way to perfection.

To my great dismay, I repeatedly found that I was still unable to make everything happen the way I wanted. Even when I *did* manage to reach a specific goal, such as reading The Book of Mormon from cover to cover or earning a perfect GPA, the resulting “happiness” was disappointingly short-lived. All too quickly it was swallowed up by a wave of discouragement as I contemplated the ever-increasing list of goals remaining before me.

As I moved on in life and became a mother, a similar pattern unfolded. My children brought me indescribable joy, but being responsible for their spiritual growth multiplied my fears and frustrations. These precious little ones needed to be carefully prepared for the celestial kingdom, or we would never qualify as an eternal family.

The thought of being separated from my husband and children was unbearable, so I made endless lists of goals to avert that tragedy. Whether I wrote them on paper or carried them around in my head, the lists were always there to remind me that I was completely and utterly failing. While my Molly Mormon obsession continued to thrive, the crushing weight of perfectionism left my guilt-ridden spirit struggling for survival.

About five years before that hair appointment with Janet, my hopes for eventual happiness teetered precariously. Our oldest son, David, who had just turned sixteen, was spinning out of control,

and I could see no way to make things end well. Little did I know that two dramatic events would soon transform my perception of happiness, along with my entire understanding of God.

The first event occurred on a warm spring day when David nervously approached me and informed me that he was gay. My fragile world shattered. All of my fleeting Molly Mormon hopes and dreams were annihilated in a single blow, and an overwhelming season of sorrow ensued. Despair shrouded my life throughout the months that followed, and for a time, I was barely able to function. All hope of happiness—present or future—had vanished.

The second event came in the midst of my darkest hour. Without warning, God wrapped me in the arms of His indescribable love and released me from the iron fist of my agonizing misconceptions. Gently, mercifully, He introduced me to the glorious light of this undeniable truth: God never intended me to be a Molly Mormon!

By divine design, I am a *Molly Mortal*, who like every other mortal, can joyfully look to a loving Savior for healing and peace. At last I understood. Life isn't about attaining perfection by completing a comprehensive checklist of noble goals. Life is about knowing and loving God.

Without realizing it, I had focused my quest for perfection on my own mortal power to accomplish, rather than on Christ's divine power to redeem. Though many things on my Molly Mormon lists were completely appropriate to do—even needful in many circumstances—I finally realized that real happiness comes from devotion to God, and true devotion to God can never come from a list. It can only come from the heart.

Confessions of a Molly Mormon exposes seven former attitudes that I once tried to hide, hoping to maintain the *appearance* of a righteous Latter-day Saint woman. Today I openly confess these attitudes, because in doing so, the way is paved for me to testify of the joyful, life-giving freedom the Savior offers.

Embracing the weakness of mortality has allowed me to accept life as a beautiful gift designed to help me experience God's guidance, His mercy, and His endless love. As long as the earth is my home, I know I will have challenges, but through Christ's amazing grace, this Molly Mortal has learned that it is possible to trade perfectionism for peace, fear for faith, and judging for joy.