

# Broken Shelves and Snow Globes

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There is a common trope in ExMormon spaces, a way of discussing the events which lead up to an individual losing their faith and entering a faith *crisis*—their shelves break. This metaphor for unanswered questions is actually an idea that comes from Camilla Eyring Kimball, the wife and First Prophetess of former Mormon Prophet, Spencer W. Kimball,

“I’ve always had an inquiring mind. I’m not satisfied just to accept things. I like to follow through and study things out. I learned early to put aside those gospel questions that I couldn’t answer. I had a shelf of things I didn’t understand, but as I’ve grown older and studied and prayed and thought about each problem, one by one I’ve been able to better understand them.”<sup>1</sup>

When I was first perusing the online forums of former Mormons I couldn’t understand what it was that all these individuals meant about their shelves breaking. I mean, I understood the metaphor, but this shelf was completely foreign to me.

The idea is that as a member goes about their life there may be times they come across information regarding church history, or old doctrines and policies which cause them to question the intent, honesty, and truthfulness of the church and/or the Gospel. This can range from anything such as polygamy in the early church, the priesthood ban and racist rhetoric, Book of Mormon translation issues and historicity, the Mountain Meadows Massacre, conversion therapy, lack of DNA and archeological evidence, Joseph Smith’s treasure digging or con artistry—the list continues. When a member has an unanswered question about any of these or other troublesome issues, no matter how benign or detrimental, the question and events are placed like trinkets and novels on a shelf in the back of the mind and out of the way until an answer is found—which may not be in their lifetime. As time goes on, some people have placed so many concerning things about the church and their beliefs on that shelf that the weight is too much to bear, so it collapses and shatters to pieces on the ground of the mind, leaving a crater the size of a faith crisis where their hope and trust in the Lord used to abide.

The more I thought about this shelf metaphor the more I realized I just never had one. Whenever I came upon something that left my questions unanswered it didn’t bother me to not

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<sup>1</sup> Ramsey, Megan Thomson., *I Do Not Know the Meaning of All Things*, Liahona., Church Magazines, Young Adult., April 2022., online at <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/liahona/2022/04/young-adults/13-i-do-not-know-the-meaning-of-all-things-and-thats-ok?lang=eng>

know or understand; a precursor for the easy leap from belief to unbelief. I knew deep down that a time would come when God would provide the answer. I even held space for the possibility that there just might not be an answer to certain things, at least none that I would be able to understand until I had grown into the same breadth of wisdom as my Lord & Savior, and Father in Heaven—which may not be until I myself become a God. My answer to any questionable event, then, was that I need fear not, for God will eventually answer, or I will eventually have the applicable personal witness. Anything and everything I came across didn't need to be put on a shelf of uncertainty for later examination, it was all put out to the pasture of memory, grazing on the grass of the Gospel and providing nutrients for a more full view of God's plan in action. Prophetic infallibility wasn't much of an issue when I was younger. The vibe was more or less, they're still men, on occasion they will stumble as well, and that is part of the process of forging your faith. Only Christ was perfect and non-temptable. If we expect the prophets to be as perfect as Christ we expect too much of men taking the same test and course of life as we are. Furthermore, if they were to be unerring, Christ would become a character of no special quality or repute.

As the months went by discussing broken shelves with other ExMormons, the best I could come up with in comparison was that my snow globe had shattered instead of a shelf. See, Sister Kimball and most ExMormons I have met put her questions on a shelf and examined them over time before her shelf broke. I placed mine in a field, accepting them for what they were. I didn't put unanswered questions on a shelf, I put spiritually evasive clarifications out into the terrain of my Mormon experience. I didn't have a shelf getting crowded, I had a snow globe that kept growing year by year, receiving a bigger base and a bigger glass dome, housing all of this information to be shaken up and viewed from all angles. But it wasn't when I had a crisis of faith that this shattered—*that* crisis never arrived. It's when I had a crisis of meaning and existence that it shattered. Though it didn't shatter in the sense that all those enigmatic, historical, and controversial souvenirs—frozen in the safety of their wintery wonderland—also broke to bits and pieces; I was still content with many of the answers or justifications I had found and placed in my snow globe. No, it all remained numb in an ontological shock where there was no avoiding the fact that it had become permanently exposed to the outer elements; becoming *of* the world instead of living within the security of an isolated globe *in* the world.