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## A Masterpiece on Resisting Our Impulses to Leave

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## A MASTERPIECE ON RESISTING OUR IMPULSES TO LEAVE

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Daniel Ortner

Review of S. Michael Wilcox, *Holding On: Impulses to Leave and Strategies to Stay* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2021). 128 pages. \$11.99 (paperback).

**Abstract:** *In his latest book, S. Michael Wilcox has written a masterpiece on grappling with doubts and overcoming our impulses to leave the Church. Wilcox displays a refreshing degree of personal vulnerability and openness, deep empathy and compassion for the struggling; and concrete and memorable suggestions for successfully dealing with faith crises. These traits give this book a power that no other work published by Deseret Book on this topic can match.*

In the past decade, there have been many wonderful books directed at those who are struggling with doubts or who find themselves in a crisis of faith. Deseret Book has published several of these stellar titles from such notable authors as Patrick Mason,<sup>1</sup> Bruce and Marie Hafen,<sup>2</sup> and Terryl and Fiona Givens.<sup>3</sup> Now they have published S. Michael Wilcox's *Holding On: Impulses to Leave and Strategies to Stay*, which deserves the same amount of attention and praise these illustrious forebearers received.

Wilcox's book is somewhat unassuming. It is a slim 128-page volume. Its tone is devotional yet conversational. Wilcox offers at least three things that together set this work apart from others I have read on the topic. First of all, Wilcox shows a degree of personal vulnerability and

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1. Patrick Q. Mason, *Planted: Belief and Belonging in Age of Doubt* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015).

2. Bruce C. Hafen and Marie K. Hafen, *Faith Is Not Blind* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2018).

3. Terryl Givens and Fiona Givens, *The Crucible of Doubt: Reflections On the Quest for Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2014).

openness with his own personal faith struggles that is very refreshing. Second, Wilcox shows a great degree of empathy and compassion for those who struggle. Third, Wilcox offers in his compact volume many memorable and concrete tips for reframing and overcoming doubt.

### Personal Perspective on Faith Crises

“I remember vividly my first ‘faith crisis’” (p. 7). This is how Wilcox begins the first chapter of the book. He goes on to describe his teenage agony of being unable to gain a testimony of the Book of Mormon. This story sets the stage for other similar reflections throughout the book.

Wilcox admits that he “had to grapple with faith-shakers, interrupting moments, and even individuals who desired to destroy my ‘rejoicings’” (p. 26). He emphasizes that these types of moments of struggle through doubt and darkness have “happened more than once in my life” (p. 10), and that for him this is an “ongoing battle” (p. 12). Indeed, he notes his “awareness that I will probably go to the grave facing the battlefront of personal faith’s oppositions” (p. 17).

Wilcox, a popular devotional speaker and the well-known author of many books published by Deseret Book, is no stranger to sharing deeply personal experiences in his books. For instance, in 2011 Wilcox published *Sunset: On the Passing of Those We Love*, a highly personal reflection on loss and mourning, written shortly after the death of his wife Laurie. And yet it is still somewhat jarring and deeply refreshing to hear an author, in a Deseret Book work on faith and doubt, so openly and candidly discuss his own personal moments of doubt and uncertainty.

Other works on faith crisis published by Deseret Book have lacked this personal element. For instance, Mason effectively relays stories of others unsettled in their faith,<sup>4</sup> as do the Hafens. These works lack the personal touch of the author’s *own* experience grappling with doubts. And this type of personal reflection is largely outside of the scope of Givens’s philosophical musings.

Most memorably, Wilcox poignantly speaks of his own faith struggles connected to the death of his wife:

When my wife, my beautiful Laurie, died ten years ago, my path narrowed. Unease and hidden fears crept into my mind, troubling me when alone at night. All my hopes and happiness rested on the beliefs of my chosen religion and the path I had walked since childhood. They rested on temple ordinances,

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4. Mason, *Planted*, Chapter 5, 75-98.

promises, and authority vested in a temple sealer. They rested on the assurances of life after death and an eternal family. Was there a Laurie? Was she still mine? Did Joseph Smith teach revealed truth when he introduced celestial marriage? (p. 12)

Later on, Wilcox returns to his relationship with Laurie, emphasizing how his love for her and the power of their sealing provide a touchpoint for the faith he returns to in moments of doubt or struggle:

I lay that sealing splendor on the scale. It alone, independent of any other weight, tips the scale down on the side of staying belief and faith. It was the supreme moment of my life, its summit, the best day to be alive. How can I leave that? If God gave me only this memory, I would have lived a fulfilled life — more than compensated for all the gratitude, services, and obedience I could offer in return. (p. 37)

At other times, Wilcox openly discusses how he struggles with certain doctrines or events in Church history, such as the priesthood ban (pp. 55-58) and polygamy (pp. 60, 86-89). For instance, Wilcox does not mince words, noting, for example, that he “sincerely wish[es that] we didn’t have this racial discrimination in Church history” and that “we had continued on the more racially inclusive track Joseph Smith had started” (p. 57).

But what is most refreshing about Wilcox’s reflections on his own personal doubts is that he does not write as someone who inevitably overcame these doubts through his own personal strength and merits. To the contrary, Wilcox is very open to the possibility that each of these struggles may have ended differently for him.

As an example, when discussing his teenage failure to learn if the Book of Mormon was true, Wilcox muses, “Had I been older, would things have turned out differently? Would I have followed the impulse to leave?” (p. 9). Wilcox attributes his willingness to stay to the example of his mother, who had an “abiding love of the book,” which motivated him to “return and receive the witness I desperately wanted” (p. 9). Later, Wilcox describes his “traumatic” first temple experience, from which he was left “bewildered, frightened, confused, filled with doubt, [and] overpowered with anxiety” (p. 111). He notes, with humility, that “had I been older, more settled, and more secure in my own wisdom, perhaps the impulses to leave would have been strong enough at that moment to shift the essentials out of my center. What a world of fulfillment and joy I would have missed” (p. 111).

Wilcox's willingness to share his own struggles is not incidental. Wilcox recognized that "as we journey on the road of faith, we can take comfort in knowing that others face and have faced similar challenges" (p. 24). There is great value to being led by a guide that has personally traversed the terrain. Wilcox's own personal struggles give the book depth and relatability.

### **Empathy for Those Struggling**

Wilcox couples his personal reminiscences with a profound sense of empathy and understanding for those who struggle. This empathy permeates every aspect of the book. For instance, Wilcox chooses to use the term "impulses to leave" rather than faith "crises" because he notes that "the word *crisis* can be a bit threatening, especially when questioning implies a lack of faith" (p. 15).

Wilcox recognizes that many of the issues individuals struggle with in Church history or doctrine are difficult and can "wring the heart" (p. 23). He acknowledges that "many who leave the Church have done so with great inner turmoil, grief, and introspection" (p. 15). Wilcox, therefore, does not condemn those who doubt. On the contrary, he explains that

questioning and facing doubts are not condemnable wrongs. In the long run, they often bring greater conviction. ... Questions are often hammers that break the opaque windows of our lives to let in light. The very word *question* suggests a quest. We want it to be a quest for truth and goodness. It is a search, and searching is something we are commanded to do. (pp. 23-24)

This combination of the author's humility and willingness to admit his own personal doubts and the charity and compassion he shows for those who struggle and doubt seems very basic, but its effect is nevertheless nothing short of revelatory. This combination of humility and empathy has the power to build bridges and destroy barriers. It is my hope that this will allow those who read this book to let down their guard and to be touched by the powerful recommendations that Wilcox offers.

### **Concrete Suggestions to Strengthen Faith**

One of Wilcox's strengths as a speaker and author is his ability to paint concrete and memorable images that powerfully teach gospel principles. This book is no exception. Wilcox offers several that remain etched in my mind:

- He asks us to imagine a deer or goat walking on a tiny ledge at the top of a tall mountain. In doing so he urges us to "hold on' until the path widens" (p. 11).

- He uses the image of a brass, antique balance scale to urge us to “balance the scale” when we face doubt (p. 30). He urges those struggling to “remember the weights on the believing, staying side — the touches of love, rays of glory, and words from the Savior” (p. 32). Wilcox then describes several of these positive weights, including the experiences and testimony of Joseph Smith (p. 33), touches of love from God in the form of patriarchal and temple blessings (pp. 35–37), and powerful words of comfort and inspiration from the scriptures (pp. 37–44), among others (pp. 47–49).
- When balancing the scale, Wilcox further urges us to remove negative weights from the scale by “celebrat[ing] the good” and “forgiv[ing] all the rest” (pp. 53–63).
- He retells Hans Christian Anderson’s story of the Snow Queen, which involves a magic mirror that showed all the worst and most negative aspects of the world. The fragments of that mirror were then scattered across the world, impacting our vision. Wilcox laments the “tendency in human beings to see things through the mirror dust, focusing on negative qualities rather than positive” (p. 67). In contrast, God’s mirror “diminishes the ugly and the negative while enhancing the beautiful and positive” (p. 67).
- Wilcox urges us to “draw strength from the chain,” meaning that we should both draw courage from those who have come before us and left a legacy of faith, and also look forward to our descendants with the goal of leaving a legacy of faith and testimony (pp. 83–92).

Chapter 6, “Draw Strength from the Chain” (pp. 83–92), was for me the most powerful and evocative. I especially loved Wilcox’s description of going into the sealing room of the temple and imagining past generations urging him to “draw strength from us” and pleading with him, “Don’t break the chain!” (p. 85). But true to form, Wilcox imagines these ancestors “question[ing] not with condemnation, not with judgment, but with gentleness” (p. 89). As a convert to the Church, when I have personally experienced my own impulses to leave, envisioning my ancestors for whom I have been able to do temple work cheering me on, is a very powerful motivator to stay and continue.

In Chapter 7, “Center the Essentials” (pp. 95–113), Wilcox first describes “fortified churches” built in Romania with a tight protective wall around them. Using this metaphor, he urges us to “center the essentials,” including faith, family, and the “center of the center,” which is



“the constant, deeply personal, open, pouring-out, holding-nothing-back communication with the Father and the accompanying desire of doing only that which pleases Him” (p. 108).

This chapter was, in my opinion, the weakest of the book. The metaphor involving fortified churches felt like a bit of a thematic departure from the rest of the book. At times this chapter felt like material for a separate talk later molded to fit the theme of the book rather than an organic outgrowth of what had come before.

Despite this slight unevenness, there is much depth and wisdom in Wilcox’s stories, and the powerful images leave a lasting impression. He has, in short, written a masterpiece on faith and doubt. I could not recommend it more highly for either those who grapple with “impulses to leave” or those of us who minister to or care about those who face such impulses — in other words, all of us.

**Daniel Ortner** *is a constitutional lawyer who specializes in the First Amendment. He joined The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints while an undergraduate. He comes from a Jewish background. He lives in the Sacramento area with his wife and three daughters.*