



## Influenced: The Troubling Familiarity of Ruby Franke's Story

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*Shaken by Ruby Franke's story? That discomfort can be a call for self-reflection. Her case reveals how the obsession with image can distort values and lead to devastating choices.*

Hulu's recent series *Devil in the Family* tells the tragic story of Ruby Franke, a Latter-day Saint family vlogger who seemed to have it all until she was sent to jail for child abuse. Franke amassed millions of followers and more than a billion views on YouTube with fun and relatable videos of her family. But Hulu, armed with more than 1000 hours of Franke's unseen footage, showed what was happening between the picture-perfect takes that made it to YouTube. It is painful to watch in more ways than one.

There are things we could quibble with about how Latter-day Saints are portrayed in the series, such as the emphasis on Christ's Second Coming and statements from church leaders and members, which are **taken out of context**. But in our conversations with Latter-day Saints, one of the most common themes we've heard is how *relatable* the Franke family seems. It's easy to imagine Ruby, her (now) ex-husband Kevin, and their six children living on your street, attending your ward. We recognize the neighborhoods, the faith, the cultural pressures. More disturbingly, many Latter-day Saints see Ruby and Kevin in themselves. The resemblance, for some, is uncanny and unnerving. The series raises a troubling question: If this can happen in the Franke family, what can happen in mine?

We do not think that Ruby's story is somehow "representative" of Latter-day Saints in Utah or elsewhere. Few Latter-day Saints will go as far as Ruby did. But Ruby's story provides a useful opportunity for self-reflection and self-evaluation. As part of that reflection, we explore a few pressures and temptations which are relevant to the Franke case but which also apply to many others, both in the Church and out. Our observations and insights are limited by the information available, and our goal is not to pass judgment but to learn from this cautionary tale.

## Perfectionism

One of the most relatable and disturbing aspects of the Franke story is not just the pursuit of perfection but the obsession with the image of *looking* perfect—happy, fulfilled, wholesome, airbrushed, aesthetic, and flawless. Even a ten-year-old knows the right angle to hold the camera for a selfie. This is not an issue found only in church culture. Western culture breeds it. We just happen to marinate in it in a way that **confuses** "be ye therefore perfect" with "be ye therefore polished."

Within the first few minutes of the series, *Devil in the Family* dives into a discussion of perfectionism. "There's a certain culture here, a culture of perfectionism," says a Utah Valley therapist who once worked for Jodi Hildebrandt. "Wanting to look a certain way, wanting to be good, wanting to be perfect." Did the Franke's deal with perfectionism? The answer seems to be a clear yes.

According to Kevin, "Ruby's sole ambition was to be seen as the perfect mom."

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In a world where so much is being broadcast, or at minimum documented, there can be great pressure to want to look as if “all is well in Zion.” As a public-facing family with a broad audience, the pressure to maintain the image of perfection could feel even more extreme. But we should not let the desire to look perfect overpower our commitment to doing good.

**Perfectionism** tends to conflate being righteous with being **flawless**, an impossible standard that sets us up for unhealthy self-criticism and disappointment. The emphasis on avoiding all mistakes (or at least the appearance of mistakes) can lead us to shame-based coping or discipline strategies. Jodi Hildebrant, Ruby’s friend, therapist, and later business partner, unfortunately, employed many shame-based tactics for behavior change within the Franke family. Despite the pretense that such strategies take misbehavior “seriously,” recent research shows that shame is not very motivating. If we really want to change ourselves or others, we should reach for other strategies.

There tends to be very little forgiveness or grace in perfectionism. Any minor mistake, any flaw, is magnified to the point where we can no longer see the good in ourselves or others. And when we extend the expectation of perfection to our children, we overestimate our ability to control their behavior as well as their ability to live flawlessly. For example, most parents can relate to the experience of having a child throw a tantrum in a store. We may worry and think, “What do other people think of my parenting?” We mistakenly believe that good parents would not have children who act out in such public displays. However, the truth is that ... kids are kids. All humans are imperfect and in a state of becoming. We all make mistakes, we all fall short. But our mistakes and shortcomings do not define us.

As Dieter F. Uchtdorf has **taught**, God is not surprised by our mistakes, nor does he relish the thought of punishing us for our fallen nature. He wants us to learn and grow, and that process will include many mistakes:

“We have all seen a toddler learn to walk. He takes a small step and totters. He falls. Do we scold such an attempt? Of course not. What father would punish a toddler for stumbling? We encourage, we applaud, and we praise because with every small step, the child is becoming more like his parents.”

He continues:

“I believe in a Heavenly Father who is loving and caring and who rejoices in our every effort to stand tall and walk toward Him. Even when we stumble, He urges us not to be discouraged—never to give up or flee our allotted field of service—but to take courage, find our faith, and keep trying.”

Hildebrant’s counseling approach, which Ruby evidently adopted, distorted religious principles as she taught that “truth” required complete control, rigidity, and perfection. Further, when people fell short, Hildebrant thought the result should be extreme discipline (which became life-threatening in the case of the two youngest Franke children) or cutting off relationships. This is clearly a distortion of Latter-day Saint teaching and practice.

True goodness requires us to acknowledge our imperfections, extend grace to ourselves and others, repent, and keep trying—without pretending we are perfect.

Perfectionism doesn’t allow for inevitable struggles, mistakes, and vulnerability of humanity. It hollows us out, leaving us empty and exhausted in our relentless pursuit of an impossible standard. But Christ does not demand that we be flawless—He invites us to come to Him. His perfection is not a measuring stick for our failure but a gift that bridges the gap between us and our Heavenly Father. Where perfectionism isolates us, Christ’s wholeness connects us. Where perfectionism shames, [Christ redeems](#). When we let perfectionism go, we open the possibility of truly connecting with Him and others.

Algorithms may decide what appears on our screens, but we decide whether or not to look.

## Outsourcing Moral Responsibility

A challenge Kevin faced was different, nonetheless just as relatable for many. Early in the series, Kevin says he was very insecure. He said he was “willing to do anything to keep” his relationship with Ruby, even when this meant leaving home and not contacting his wife or children for an unspecified amount of time. (From what we can

gather, it seems that Kevin needed to prove to Jodi that he had changed in order to be let back into the family.)

This, tragically, opened the door to the worst abuse that the Franke children suffered. With Kevin out of the picture, Ruby and Jodi resorted to more extreme methods of discipline and punishment. When Kevin received a call from Ruby on the day the police raided Jodi's house, Kevin said it was the first time he had talked to his wife in a year.

Many viewers have been perplexed by Kevin's actions. How could he let this happen? How could he just walk away from his family? In an interview with [People Magazine](#), Kevin tries to explain himself:

"A lot of people will look at me and say, 'How could he ever do that?' but for those who respectfully ask me about it and say, 'How could you?' my response to that is 'Who do you love more than anybody?' And I say, 'Well, what would happen if that individual that you love more than anybody started to go another way and started inviting you and encouraging you to go with them?' Would you be able to easily say, 'Goodbye, you're out of my life?'"

This willingness to do anything ... is a dangerous place to be.

No doubt, it is a difficult dilemma. Many of us probably would have responded the same way that Kevin did. But it seems that Kevin's desire to stay connected with his wife overrode his best judgment about his family's needs and moral responsibility. At one point Kevin said he was "1000% compliant" to what Ruby and Jodi told him to do with the hope that he could save his marriage. This willingness to do *anything* to preserve a relationship (or what's left of it) is a dangerous place to be.



*Outsourcing moral responsibility: “Things to act and things to be acted upon.”*

In 2 Nephi 2:14, Lehi teaches that God “created all things, both the heavens and the earth, and all things that in them are, both things to act and things to be acted upon.” When we outsource moral responsibility to other people in the hopes of gaining or keeping their approval, we give up our birthright as beings who are free to act. As painful as it may sometimes be, there should be lines that we are not willing to cross—not for our friends, not for our family members, not for people who threaten us with rejection for following our conscience.

This can be difficult because belonging and connection are innate, natural human needs. Family and friends can form the fabric of our lives. We need each other to thrive. At the same time, we must remember the first great commandment: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind” (Matthew 22:37). All other desires or goals are secondary. The desire for approval must not lead us to outsource our moral responsibility.

## Following Flawed Influencers

Finally, it seems that Ruby and Kevin allowed themselves to be unduly influenced by Jodi. The Franke’s (and many others) saw her as special, chosen—someone who had rare access to spiritual wisdom and knowledge. Jodi provided a kind of certainty and “answers” to issues that the Frankes were facing with parenting and life in general. (We note, in passing, that Jodi’s professional license had been **suspended** beginning in 2012 for unethical conduct. She was not a therapist in good standing when she began to

advise the Franke's.) Tragically, the more the Franks let Jodi in, the more their lives fell apart.

This kind of influence is a microcosm of the many ways we can be influenced in our lives. Being influenced in a negative direction has always been a danger, but in our day, online influencers hold a reach never before seen in human history. Voices from many directions tell us that they have the solutions to our problems, our aspirations, and our pains. It's easy to be drawn in by so many confident voices. It's also big business. According to Goldman Sachs analysts, the creator economy was valued at \$250 billion in 2023.

Reflecting these broader cultural trends, Latter-day Saint influencers have also expanded their reach, amassing millions of followers and using these platforms to share content (hopefully positive) ranging from therapy to homesteading—all through a faith-centric lens. Their growing influence even led to 2024 being dubbed 'the year of the Mormon women.'

President Russell M. Nelson has addressed the importance of managing our digital consumption and being mindful of online influences. [Addressing the youth](#) in June 2018, he challenged them to embark on a seven-day social media fast. He encouraged them to observe how this hiatus could affect their priorities and deepen their relationship with the Savior. Later, he extended a similar [invitation to the women](#) of the Church asking them to participate in a ten-day social media fast, emphasizing the need to reduce distractions and focus on spiritual matters. He also invited men to review their online habits in an inspirational call to [do and "be better"](#). The message is clear: the world is full of competing voices vying for our attention, but we can be intentional about what we allow to shape us. We don't have to be slaves to the algorithms.

It's also worth remembering the non-digital ways we can influence others. Carol reflects on her own mother's impact:

If Christ and His teachings are our greatest influence, we will be less susceptible to the voices that would distort, manipulate, or diminish.

She wasn't famous. Seeking attention wasn't her way. But she had a unique gift for finding those in need of friendship, welcoming them into our family circle, and right up to our dinner table. In later years, I've come to understand more clearly the sadness she carried and the insecurities she battled. She struggled with her image, yet she continued to offer herself—first to bring me and my siblings into the world and then to care for us through a lifetime of devotion.

I can't begin to count the hours she spent giving us rides to activities, wrangling younger siblings while watching me perform in a play, or with my shaky, squeaky violin in a school orchestra. Then, hurrying home to make dinner (which, to my shame, we often complained about), only to still manage to pull us into folding clothes and keeping the house clean—ensuring it was always comfortable enough for friends to drop by unannounced.

She had one driving passion—one she shared with us, imbuing us with a love for family history. As the only child and only member of the Church in her ancient family line, she breathed life into our ancestral past and inspired me to consider my own legacy.

She fought her battle with cancer to her last ragged breath, not in defiant resistance, but in love.

She didn't curate a "feed" or seek validation through likes and shares. She simply lived—a life of sacrifice, service, and steadfast love. She wasn't perfect, and she would be frustrated by any attempt to paint her that way. But somehow, her unseen efforts—those small, daily acts—shaped me more than any algorithm ever could.

My mom built something real, something lasting—she built me.

In a world obsessed with platforms and personas, algorithms may decide what appears on our screens, but we decide whether or not to look. We can seek out influences (digital and otherwise) that are quiet, unpolished, unseen by the masses—but real. We each have [agency](#).



At the very end of *Devil in the Family*, Kevin reflects on the meaning of his story. He concludes by saying, “Ultimately, it’s a story of faith. If you put your faith in the wrong hands, you can lose everything.” As he says these words, the viewer is flown over a statue of the angel Moroni on the top of an LDS temple. The producers’ implication seems clear: the Franks trusted their religion too much, and this led to their downfall.

That is not how we would sum up these lessons. What stands out is not just the cautionary tale of a family unraveling under pressure but the deeply personal challenge of self-examination. It is easy to watch someone else’s story and opine about where they veered from their values. It is far more difficult to be honest about where we might be doing the same.

If we care more about reflecting God’s image than curating our own, we will be less tempted to mask our struggles with a performance of perfection. If we have the integrity to act in ways that align with our values—even when it’s inconvenient or unpopular—we will be less likely to hand over our moral responsibility to others. And if Christ and His teachings are our greatest influence, we will be less susceptible to the voices that would distort, manipulate, or diminish our ability to truly love and lead.

The devil gets in where there is pretense, where there is self-deception, and where there is fear. But where there is truth, integrity, and divine influence, he has no foothold. That is the lesson worth taking from this story—and it is one of faith.

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