

# The Better for My Foes: The Role of Opposition

## Editors' Note

*The following essay was initially given as an address to a Salt Lake City chapter of the Utah Association of Women in February, 1979. It is printed here in a somewhat revised form.*

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I draw my inspiration from two sources—the noted American political philosopher and journalist Walter Lippmann, and the Clown, or Fool, from Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. Since clowning is the older, and in some ways more serious, profession, let us begin there.

As you remember, the Fools in Shakespeare's dramas were anything but fools. Often the greatest wisdom of the play came from that quarter. The clown in *Twelfth Night* is no exception. In Act V, scene 1, Orsino, the Duke of Illyria, says to the Clown, by way of greeting, "How dost thou, my good fellow?" To which the Clown replies, "Truly, sir, the better for my foes and the worse for my friends." The Duke tries to correct him: "Just the contrary—the better for thy friends."

"No sir, the worse."  
"How can that be?"



"Marry, sir, they praise me and make an ass of me. Now my foes tell me plainly I am an ass, so that by my foes, sir, I profit in the knowledge of myself, and by my friends I am abused. So that . . . the worse for my friends, and the better for my foes."

To which the Duke replies, "Why this is excellent." Which, I hope to establish, it is indeed.

## Sometimes those who agree easily and quickly with us do us a disservice.

The same insight came to King Lear, after he had been so reduced in circumstances that he was literally naked and homeless upon the moor in a raging storm. Speaking in anger and bitterness about the many lackeys and paid flatterers who had clustered around him in his former days of glory, he said, "They told me I was ague-proof." That is, they flattered him so outrageously that he believed he was immune even from the common afflictions, such as the ague, or flu, that are the lot of humankind.

Thus Lear is pointing out that sometimes those who agree easily and quickly with us do us a disservice; and the clown is explaining that those whom we may consider our foes can actually be our greatest benefactors.

The concept of the valued opposition is not, I fear, very well understood in our Mormon culture; and without it, we cause ourselves and others needless grief and may actually hinder what we would advance. As I have listened to speeches and public discussions, read letters to the editors of several newspapers, both in Utah and outside, heard people debate among themselves on various controversies, ranging from the activities of the Environmental Protection Agency and the Bureau of Land Management, to the advisability of parenting classes in the high schools, to the relative merits of a constitutional amendment on equal rights, I have observed four general attitudes, four ways of viewing opposition. There are surely others, but these four seem to predominate: (1) Opposition as persecution, (2) Opposition as Counsel for the Defense, (3) Opposition as airing of personal opinion, and (4) Opposition as Sand in the Shoes.

The first attitude reveals what we could call a Hatfield-McCoy pattern of response, a "Them 'n Us" philosophy, whose motto is, "Fire at Will, For the Enemy Is All Around Us!" This philosophy teaches that the opposition is basically a passel of no-good skunks out to get Us in every way possible, and that even though this week our concern may be with stopping them from stealing our hogs, we can never let our guard down, because next week They (or someone in cahoots with Them) will be trying to poison the well or dynamite the privy. In other words, this camp views the opposition as unmitigated evil, and as far as *listening* to the opposition goes, they listen only long enough to fix the enemy position before blasting away.

(When I originally formulated these ideas, I wrote: "I really don't think this militia group to be very large, but they are loud." Today, I feel a deeper concern. The ranks of the self-appointed righteous seem to be swelling, if not yet a majority, labels notwithstanding.)

For Mormons, and for many other Christians, the problem arises, I believe, out of the confusion of human opposition—in matters political, economic, educational, even religious—with the supernatural Opposition. It is

understandably easy, but unequivocally dangerous, to move from viewing Satan as the Opposition, to viewing any mortal opposition as Satanic. To put it another way, all that is of Satan is Opposition, but all that opposes us is not Satanic. Yet down through the centuries, such an attitude has often prevailed, as men have made the slippery step from "This is what we believe" to "This is what God believes, and death to the infidels who believe otherwise."

Not every skirmish is a holy war. We can effectively root out waste and inefficiency in public office without believing that every politician is in the pay of Satan. We can debate how our communities and valleys can best be developed and protected, without convincing ourselves and others that those who oppose us (on whatever side they happen to be) are advance men for the Adversary. We can consider how best to structure our schools, without consigning the neighbor who disagrees with us to the legions of Lucifer.

Now to the second attitude toward opposition. This is, in many respects, a more intelligent approach to opposition, so much so in fact that I'm going to call it the Lawyer's attitude. But intelligent as this attitude is, in the right place, it is still not the appropriate stance for people trying seriously to discover how best to regulate our government, outfit our schools, develop our resources, and incorporate a moral ethic into our society.

This attitude toward opposition says, "We must listen to the opposition, study them closely, read their literature, and hear their spokespersons, *in order that we may know how to refute their arguments.*" I call this the lawyer's attitude because the lawyer does not go into court to tell all he knows of a case, and certainly he does not go into court to *learn* what he does not know. In fact, an old axiom says that a lawyer must never ask of a witness any question to which he, the lawyer, does not already know the answer. There must be, in short, no surprises. The lawyer is in court, is being paid, to advocate *one* particular position with all the skill and eloquence he has. He must try to outwit his opponents by guessing what form their questioning will take. He must try to know about any evidence they plan to introduce, any witness they may call. He tries to think of every point the opposing lawyers could conceivably make—not so that he can change his mind about what he believes, but so that he will be prepared in court for any direction the argument may take.

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Now, given the nature of our judicial system, such an attitude is professionally justified. One or more lawyers represent each side of a case, and the judge and jury decide the truth as best they can. But the individual truth-seeker who has the lawyer's attitude about the opposition is short-changing himself, for *who will be the judge* if he has already made up his mind before he hears what the other side has to say, if he listens *only to refute?* Such a person has skipped a crucial step.

The third attitude is related to the second, in that it al-

lows every opponent "his day in court." This attitude—and I have heard it widely voiced in the Church—says, "Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but this is what I believe" (implying, "And I don't intend to change"). What could be fairer than that? Well, fair it may be, but foolish it certainly is. Remember Shakespeare's Fool? He did not merely *allow* his foes to talk; he *listened* to them and was ready to change his views on the basis of what they said, if it was logical and valid. Yet many of us today think of ourselves as enlightened because we are willing to "let others have their say," without seriously *considering* their say. The danger of this approach was brilliantly explained by the great essayist Walter Lippmann, in an article entitled, "The Indispensable Opposition" (August 1939, *The Atlantic Monthly*). In this essay, Lippmann is actually discussing why it is so important to protect the right of free speech. He says:

We take, it seems to me, a naively self-righteous view when we argue as if the right of our opponents to speak were something that we protect because we are magnanimous, noble, and unselfish. The compelling reason . . . is that we must protect the right of our opponents to speak because we must hear what they have to say.

This is the creative principle of freedom of speech, not that it is a system for the tolerating of error, but that it is a system for finding the truth . . .

. . . And so, if we truly wish to understand why freedom is necessary in a civilized society, we must begin by realizing that, because freedom of discussion improves our own opinions, the liberties of other men are our own vital necessity. . . .

The opposition is indispensable. A good statesman, like any other sensible human being, always learns more from his opponents than from his fervent supporters. For his supporters will push him to disaster unless his opponents show him where the dangers are. So if he is wise, he will often pray to be delivered from his friends, because they will ruin him. But, though it hurts, he ought also to pray never to be left without opponents; for they keep him on the path of reason and good sense.

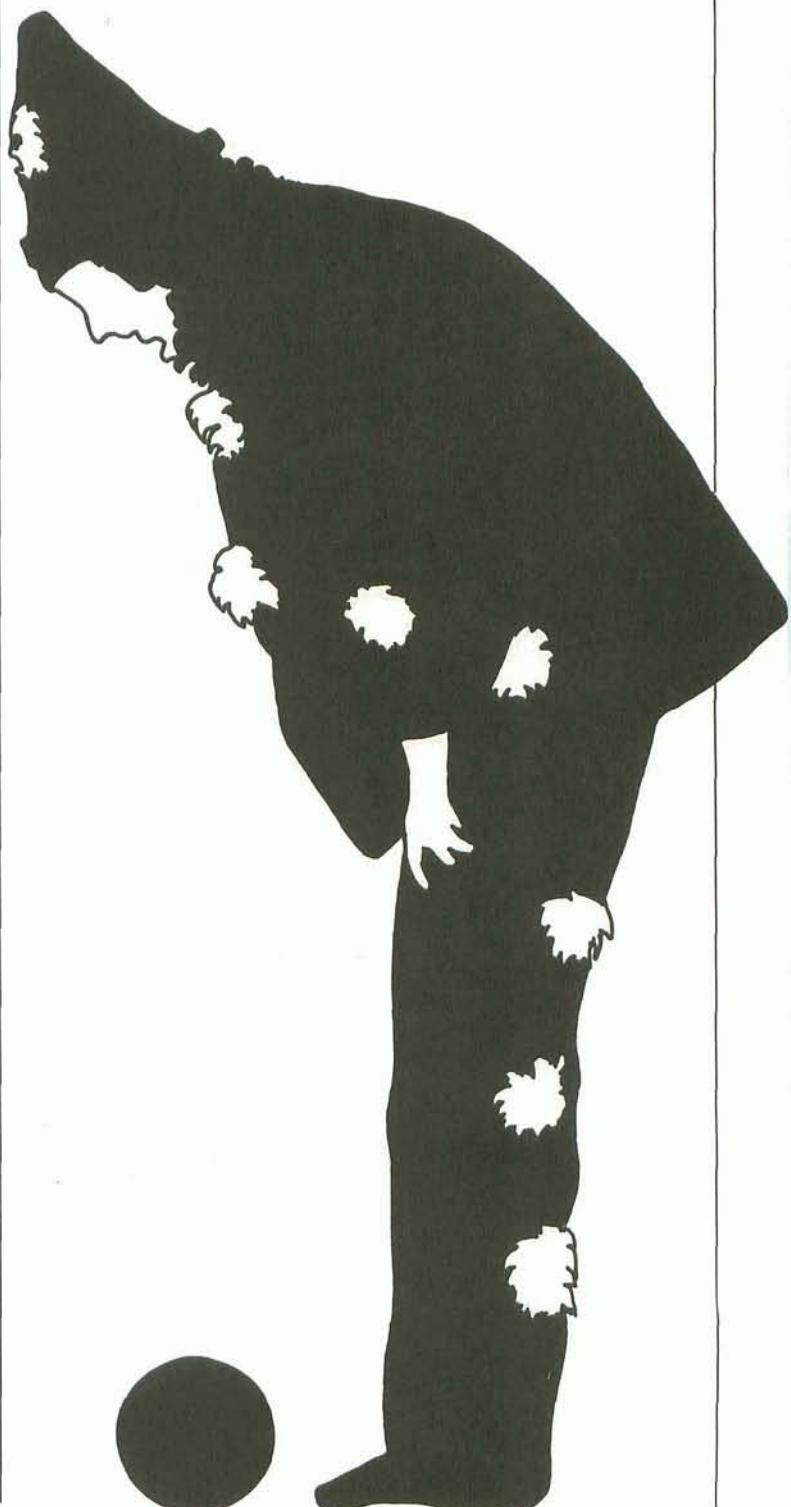
And thus we have returned to the point put forth by the Fool. If we are as wise as he, we, too, will be "the better for our foes." If we are wise, we will listen to the opposition in order to *learn*—not merely to fix their positions so we may fire upon them nor to know their arguments so we may defeat them nor simply to allow them "equal time" to air their opinions. We will listen to others to learn if our own perceptions are right and true, conscious always that they may not be.

Now there is yet another attitude toward opposition which I have not mentioned so far. It is both an attitude and, I think, a cause of our problems with opposition generally. I call that attitude the "Sand in Their Shoes" theory. It is related to the "Hatfield-McCoy" school, though proponents are very different in temperament, and profoundly different in theology.

The "Sand in Their Shoes" view says that opposition is necessary and inevitable. As we climb the mountain in our great quest, there is bound to be sand in our shoes from time to time. We must simply persevere, patiently removing the sand when it becomes too great an obstruction. Such a philosophy seems eminently sane and courageous, and of course it is, when applied to obstacles such as one's individual crosses—sickness, sorrow, mis-

fortune, what Shakespeare calls "the whips and scorns of time." If that is what one means by opposition, then all is well. But when this philosophy becomes muddled, and "opposition" broadens to mean "those on the other side" and is considered part of the divinely-decreed testing of one's mettle, then danger sets in. Though the "Sand in My Shoe" philosopher may be softer-spoken than the Persecuted Righteous, the roots of their problems are similar—confusing opposition with evil.

And at this point, we have come to the quick of the ulcer. Because for all Mormons, opposition has a special meaning, deeply felt if rarely examined, a meaning that



grows out of a specific scripture. It is my theory—and I stress that term—that a general misunderstanding of that scripture prevails, accounting for our many inappropriate attitudes toward any who line up on the other side of us.

The scripture is found in 2 Nephi 2, verse 11. Father Lehi says to his son Jacob:

For it needs be, that there is an opposition in all things. If not so, my first-born in the wilderness, righteousness could not be brought to pass, neither wickedness, neither holiness nor misery, neither good nor bad. Wherefore, all things must needs be a compound in one; wherefore, if it should be one body it must needs remain as dead, having no life neither death, nor corruption nor incorruption, happiness nor misery, neither sense nor insensibility.

Now, how do we understand that scripture? Well, it seems to me that a great many people interpret it by making two columns—righteousness, holiness, and good on one side (Column A) and wickedness, misery, and bad on the other (Column B). Column B is the opposition, admittedly bad but still necessary so that we might achieve, appreciate, and enjoy Column A, the good things of life.

Lehi, however, says that wickedness could not come to pass, nor misery nor evil, without opposition. If we take the view that the valiant need opposition to build up spiritual muscles, as it were, why would the wicked need it? Do they also need “sand in their shoes” to be tested, to develop character? Notice also that Lehi does *not* say, “righteousness needs opposition.” Though often understood this way, the passage reads differently. Lehi says that it is necessary that there *be* an opposition *in* all things. Without that condition as a given, righteousness could not be *brought to pass*. Righteousness wouldn’t even *happen* in the first place. Quite a different concept.

A few verses on in that same chapter, Lehi speaks of the Lord creating our first parents and the beasts and fowls of the air and then says that after this was done, “It must needs be that there was an opposition; even the forbidden fruit in opposition to the tree of life; the one being sweet and the other bitter” (2 Nephi 2:15). Now let me ask you, which fruit was sweet: the fruit of the tree of life or the fruit of the forbidden tree? The word order (plus the additional evidence of Moses 4:12) would suggest it was the forbidden fruit that was sweet, and *the fruit of the tree of life that was bitter*. Is the tree of life, the tree Adam and Eve were encouraged to eat of, *bad*, then because it is bitter? Is the bitterness “opposition”? If the Tree of Life is “bitter” must we list it in Column B?

The answer to that question may lie in the earlier verse, in the words which explain that “all things must needs be a compound in one.” Lehi says, “It must needs be that there is an opposition in all things.” Notice, *in all things, not to*. Could we restate this to say that in all aspects of life there must be, and there is, a mixture of good and bad, right and wrong, holiness and misery? This mixture, or this *opposition* of qualities, produces a state of constant motion, movement, interchange, growth, or, in short, life. Lehi explains, “if it should be one body”—that is, if there were not this compound of qualities—“it must needs remain as dead, having no life neither death....”

Consider the possibility (which I believe to be valid) that the “opposition” Lehi speaks of is not, in fact, the

“bad” or “wrong” side of things (Column B), but instead the mixture itself, the intermingling *process*, the fact that all things in life are a compound. In this sense, opposition is not at all a negative circumstance, though it involves negative qualities as well as positive ones. Because we have misinterpreted “opposition” to mean all the “evils” in Column B, we carry over that connotation to our political, economic, social, environmental, and other debates and consider our human opposition as “evil” or “bad” also—or at least we consider their *ideas* as such. Our misunderstanding of the word has misled us.

In summary of this point, then: while I definitely believe we are given struggles and pain and problems in this life in order to strengthen our characters and fortify our souls, to classify our political and other philosophical opposition as part of the “necessary evil” of this life is to accuse them falsely and to martyrize ourselves undeservedly.

In conclusion, a quotation from President Harold B. Lee: “It is good to be faithful. It is better to be faithful and competent.” I believe we will be more competent in our roles as parents, citizens, office holders, and members who would be instrumental in building a Zion society if we thought more deeply and more carefully about the nature of opposition. As a practical start, I offer the following suggestions:

1. Beware the impulse to divide opposing camps into Column A and Column B—the good guys and the bad guys. Usually any given political or social stance has both merit and weakness—the “compound in one”—including the view *you* are proposing.

2. Beware making a *person*, rather than a *position*, the opposition. If we do that, we run the risk of losing that person as an ally on another issue about which we both agree. Moreover, if we think of persons as the opposition, we may end up arguing personalities rather than issues, and at that point, reason goes out the window.

3. Beware of establishing a predictable *pattern* of opposition. Emerson taught us that “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds.” If you can always predict what side of an issue I’m going to be on, that’s a sign that I am pre-judging, biasing my response, or judging something besides the issues and the arguments.

4. Beware of self-listening to the opposition. This is listening just long enough to decide how you’re going to answer, and then not thinking beyond that point.

5. Beware of never changing your mind. I would have very little confidence in a person who had never changed his or her mind on an issue, who had never said, “Well, I thought about that some more; I studied that a bit more deeply, and decided I was wrong.”

6. Beware of the passion to take a stand, *any* stand, *now*, rather than wait and ponder. Be mature enough and confident enough to be able to live with a few loose ends, a few uncertainties.

7. Beware of confusing the Gospel’s infallibility with your own. Because the Church has access to divine and absolute truth, it does not follow that any Mormon who quotes scripture to support his view must of necessity be right.

8. Beware abandoning the wisdom of Moroni 10:4 just because you know the Book of Mormon is true. If this scripture, which exhorts us to seek truth with a sincere heart and real intent, is valid in such a weighty quest as a

testimony, surely it is a good model to follow in lesser matters, like political issues. But just as the scripture asks the investigator to seek with real intent, so in temporal matters we must study, which includes listening to our opponents, with truly open minds. The famed historian Marchette Chute has wisely said, "If you know in advance what the truth will be, you will never find it."

The still-young experiment of democracy has had many critics, from the days it was first tried in the western world. One of the most oft-repeated objections to government of and by the people is that the mass of humankind simply do not have the philosophical and rational training and understanding that would enable them to make wise, sound decisions about government

and civic affairs. The mass of mankind, according to the nay-sayers, will always be ruled by their passions, swayed by their prejudices, seduced by their propagandists, and hence incapable of enlightened self-government. I do not agree with the nay-sayers. The dangers they warn of are real, but not irrevocable. I believe government of and by the people can work. But it can only work when you and I train ourselves in the principles of sound thinking, and in particular, when we are ever mindful of the absolute indispensability of that man or woman across the aisle or on the other side of the platform, when we, like Shakespeare's wise Fool, know enough to treasure our "foe," the opposition.

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