
ONE of the necessary rites of passage from adolescence to adulthood seems to be a dawning awareness of imperfection in that which one reveres. Such eye opening has the potential for more dynamic contribution; it may lead to adult relationships between father and son, mature participation in the democratic process, soul bonding in marriage, or more substantial spirituality. It can also lead to generation gaps, factionism, divorce, or apostasy. Between those two poles are the thousand variations that constitute our individual reactions to growing up. For Mormons, growing up requires dealing with those first evidences that Mormonism, as practiced and preached by everyone from Oliver Cowdery to the latest convert, is not yet the kingdom of heaven on earth in all its glory.

Any attempt to define our various, ongoing reactions to that revelation by dividing the Church into two camps is shoddy scholarship. It is surprising how many intelligent writers have succumbed to the temptation of making things not only as simple as possible, but simpler, by creating "us-them" categories of iron rodders vs. liahonas, priests vs. prophets, or simple vs. intelligent faith. The question of how we come to critically examine the Church, and the manner and extent to which we do so, is certainly more complex than such a dichotomy allows.

For some, the initial attempts at spiritual dialectics are all too painful. The lack of definition and the feeling that something precious is slipping away makes reasoned analysis "a road not taken." Contrary to the assessment of most writers, I believe that the percentage of Church members who so soon close the door is quite small. Rather, the majority do their best to come to terms with the demands of applying rational thinking to complement and supplement their faith. The results of these efforts range from the supercilious to the sublime.

The decision to come to our own conclusions about things, whether in mundane matters like skipping a quorum fireside or more weighty issues such as supporting the ERA or defining the omniscience of God, ought to be accompanied by a certain degree of caution or even fear. That may seem surprising to those who consider the exercise of free agency to be the most natural thing in the world for us to be engaged in. Yet we are responsible for the effect that inquiry has upon us, whether it is "honest inquiry" or not. While going beyond the school marm of the law is, in its proper time, a step towards greater responsibility and growth, in its own way it is at least as risky as remaining within the bonds of faith. Recognizing that risk, while it need not deter us in our desire to be free agents, adds the proverbial fear and trembling to the working out of our own salvation.

The greatest danger in pursuing a rational theology has to be man's propensity to pride. While we are undeniably gods in embryo, some use the doctrine of free agency to tear themselves untimely from the womb. The deification of agency almost approaches idolatry, making God a mere facilitator in the hands of free agency, someone to aid us in constructing our own exaltation. As one Mormon scholar has said, "Salvation

What Sunstone Means to People Like Me

Michael Mosman

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is not a good to be purchased at any price; it is a personal quest, a spiritual odyssey driven by the inexhaustible energy of thought."¹ There is imbalance in such a philosophy. While it overinflates man's contribution to his own rescue, it also ignores the double-edged nature of agency—God is also an agent.

The imagery of the above quote is one of loneliness: Man, alone on a mountaintop with only the inexhaustible energy of his mind to propel him on in his quest through a darkened universe towards Nirvana. While loneliness can be a delicious feeling, in excess it is symptomatic of a soul spiraling inward on itself. In the end it makes us smaller by constricting our concern. When a man worships thought as his god, his heaven is in the library of the universe. Tucked away in his own study, he soars higher and higher above all things. But it is the love of the Gods to be *in* all things and *through* all things. The glory of God is not only his intelligence—it is also his fatherhood. His glory is eternal because he is endlessly involved in the earthly business of raising children. Perhaps too many disciples of thought would just as soon write a book on the subject and leave the whole grubby mess behind.

There is a natural human tendency to cherish what we have created. In an intellectual cosmology, this can lead to an imbalanced appreciation for the insights that we have discovered for ourselves, *vis a vis* revealed truths. It can also lead us to hold to that which is simply incorrect, which need pose no real danger. But when we have pondered and studied and meditated on a subject, we become convinced that our effort sanctifies our insight and that somehow the quality of truth is related to the effort it took to produce it. There is an insidious idea that the man who grabs hold of truth through "the sweat of his brow" has a better grip on it than he who receives it (seemingly) as a free gift from God. Some, for example, want to know if President Kimball consulted constitutional law experts before coming out in opposition to the ERA or if he fasted and prayed many days; did it come to him in the temple or just in the kitchen at home? The fact is that truth stands independent of our efforts to obtain it, and whether we gain more of it through coming to a correct conclusion or pure intelligence flowing into our mind, or a vision, or the voice of his servants, or his own voice, it is the same.

The propensity to overvalue those insights which lay no claim to the supposed "shortcut" of revelation can cause us to reject the Brethren when they speak out on issues in which they have little or no secular training. When our professional knowledge contradicts a definitive statement of the Brethren, our cognitive dissonance cries out for order. To automatically assume that the Brethren were misinformed is to ignore the basis of their evidence. I am not suggesting that contradictory evidence is merely satanic and must be ignored. What I am suggesting is that each form of evidence be examined according to its claims; the point of comparison between the two is not the level of secular expertise. In fact, there is *no* point of comparison. Each person will weigh them differently.

The classic example of this is the period of Church history known as the 1912 Controversy. Church

members were faced with a unanimous verdict from the greatest Egyptian scholars in the world that Joseph Smith knew absolutely nothing about translating Egyptian. In the defense of the Church were some of our most brilliant leaders, who themselves knew absolutely nothing about Egyptian. It was a choice between one form of evidence over another, and as a result members of the Mormon intelligentsia left the Church in droves—their intellectual integrity permitted no other choice. Today, while the Prophet has not exactly been vindicated, the gentile jury is still out on Joseph as a translator; but what has become of those who chose affidavits over affirmation?²

The 1912 Controversy joins a host of scriptural and historical incidents that illustrate how unwavering obedience is sometimes more flexible than deciding our own limits. The hazard of inflexible obedience is that we accept directives that are not from God; the risk of deciding our own limits is that we reject commandments that *are* of God. From Abraham to Heber C. Kimball and up through today, the Lord has had the unnerving habit of wrenching heartstrings and asking the preposterous. It seems that counting the cost is something the Lord expects from generals and architects, but dislikes in his disciples. The Abrahamic tests go beyond the bounds of rational theology, at least in the moment when decisions are made. To say "this cannot be of God," "beyond here I will not go," or "God would never ask this" is to run the risk of being too narrow, and almost certainly the demands of discipleship will press us until we shatter like glass.

The greatest heights are reached through a necessary tension, an acceptance of ambiguity. We are anxiously engaged in seeking learning, yet consider ourselves fools before God. We profess a liberating theology yet accept conserving organization. We say that wisdom is the principle thing, yet count *all* things but dung that we may win Christ. We say that God has commanded us not to kill, yet stand ready to slay our sons. It is this interplay between agency and obedience that gives us both wind and sails. Obedience alone does not get us out of the harbor, while wind alone is an empty noise. Those who have been called friend of God seem to have lived with this ambiguity. While they press forward with all their powers, seeking to turn their embryonic godhood into a reality, enough of childhood is retained to be submissive, to be flexible enough that God can mold them without explaining why. They cherish their free agency but will choose to surrender it to God if he asks: "But he knoweth the way that I take when He hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold" (Job 23:10).



Notes

1. T. Eugene Shoemaker, *Sunstone* 4 (July-August 1979): 35.

2. The information on the 1912 Controversy was obtained from a paper written by John T. Lund, an instructor at the Logan LDS Institute. When teaching about the 1912 Controversy in class, he sums up with an epigram that is very insightful with reference to two ways of knowing: "Never abandon what you know because of what you don't know."

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