

COMING OF AGE WITH JOHNNY LINGO

Kent Frogley

To this day, one of my most vivid childhood memories is the morning I spent staring slack-jawed as the lush greenery and rich culture of Polynesia came to life upon the cinder block wall of my Sunday School class. The film was *Johnny Lingo*, the story of a young Polynesian girl, poor in self-esteem and consigned to south seas spinsterhood until a suitor, seeing some hidden spark in the girl's spirit, astounds everyone by offering the never-before-heard-of purchase price of eight cows. It was a terrific film. I was moved by the story. I thought the characters finely drawn, the script understated yet powerful. I laughed. I cried. It became a part of me.

The film's several flaws only vaguely disturbed me at my tender age. Now, however, I recognize that the whole premise of the movie was hard to swallow. Mahana was not ugly. This was clear from the moment she appeared on screen. Maybe I knew a babe when I saw one. However, I preferred to believe that I too, like Johnny, recognized the nascent beauty of the misjudged heroine. In fact my fantasies of junior high (which I hoped to be attending soon) were populated by exotic women just like her. I decided the men in the isles of Johnny Lingo had been staring at the sun too much. The additional possibility of widespread substance abuse suggested itself when I saw the wives the other men had purchased for four or even five cows. I couldn't understand how they commanded such a sum. Despite of their brightly colored sarongs, these corpulent "beauties" left me unmoved. I felt vaguely that there was some subtext I was missing, given the fact that the four- and five-cow wives looked like cows themselves.

Nevertheless, this Sunday School *cinema verite* had a powerful effect on my rather amorphous views regarding women and marriage. I began to look on the future with a flinty eye.

I saw that cold cash was the name of the game. Thus there appeared next to my mission-fund bank a large doll, borrowed from my sister—my repository for future happiness. I cut a hole in the top of her head, and into her hollow body I dropped my pennies, quarters, and crumpled singles, content that I was securing my future. If I invested wisely, I calculated by the time I was ready to marry I'd have enough money for a first-rate girl as well as a honeymoon in Aruba.

In addition, I was determined that when I grew up, I would spare no expense when it came to purchasing a wife. Not only would this bestow upon her an immeasurable sense of self-worth, but considering appreciation, I knew that if I had to jettison the relationship five to ten years later, my spouse would return at least double the investment. Thus she would be not only a helpmate with great self-esteem, but a valuable inflation guard as well.

My family began to come under cold appraisal. I wondered how much Dad paid for my Mom. Growing up in an affluent household (we were the first on our block to have a Cuisinart), and judging from her beauty, I knew that my mother must represent a small fortune in hamburger. Though I'd never been told, I assumed that some portion of the herd on my grandfather's ranch was, so to speak, my mother on the hoof. Moreover, the worth of my three sisters changed dramatically in my eyes. I looked upon them as a cache of bovine trading stamps just a few years short of paying off.

As I grew older, however, certain questions started to plague me. I began to suspect that marriage wasn't the barrel of coconuts I had been led to believe. This caused me to wonder about the Lingos and how they were doing. What about Mahana herself? Did this one-shot dose of confidence really transform her life as I'd always thought? And what about the cows? Being well connected, I began checking around and found out, not without a rather

smug sense of satisfaction, that the Lingos' marriage, like so many, hadn't been all beer and skittles.

It seems Johnny's Conch Shell Comb business went "el foldo" with the invention of plastic, and he fell on hard times. On the other hand, Johnny's unheard-of purchase price of eight cows did indeed do much to boost Mahana's sagging self-image. In fact she spent the better part of each day displaying herself in front of the mirror. Through Johnny's efforts she finally had the courage to do what she had always dreamed: Mahana began singing in clubs around the island. She started small, but was soon the featured performer at the King Kamehameha room in the Kona Hilton. Spotted by a producer, Mahana made a music video of "Pearly Shells," which became a cult hit on MTV. Not wanting his wife performing on any medium banned at BYU, Johnny gave her an ultimatum: "Give up the singing, the road life, and the MTV, or I'm taking my cows back." Mahana told Johnny to "ride the wild surf," and the next thing you know she was doing the *Today Show*, commenting on repressive male attitudes and the sad state of Polynesian music while plugging her new book, *Johnny Dearest: The Dark Side of an Eight-cow Wife*. Johnny returned to his home and tried to reclaim the eight cows. But alas, Johnny's father-in-law, Moki, used them to start a ribs joint, and all eight cows had long since been smothered in barbecue sauce.

Picking up the pieces of her shattered dream, Mahana has since moved to the mainland, set up an apartment in Studio City, and today pursues a bright future. Johnny, intrepid to the end, has acquired another herd. When last seen, he was cruising singles bars in Maui.

My own dating years, on the other hand, did not prove any brighter than Johnny's doomed marriage. I discovered that the women I squired to various proms of my youth did not enthusiastically share in my dream. When I brought up my hope that their fathers might someday exchange them for a small group of cattle, the conversation began to lag. I soon find myself driving my date home the sudden victim of any one of a number of ailments I discovered females could instantly develop.

This pattern continued into my early twenties. Upon completing

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college I moved to Manhattan. I planned on making a fresh start, but things haven't worked out. As I write this, I am under psychiatric observation at Bellevue Hospital. It seems there was a rather ugly alter-

cation among the police, a dark-haired art-history student living on 109th street, a freight elevator, and eight polled herefords. When the police came, I tried to explain, but to no avail. They hadn't seen the movie.

QUERIES AND COMMENTS

HAS THE WORD OF WISDOM CHANGED SINCE 1833?

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As with many of the Church's teachings, the Word of Wisdom as it reads today in section 89 of the Doctrine and Covenants has undergone several shifts in emphasis and interpretation since it was first revealed to Joseph Smith in 1833. Prompted in part by early nineteenth-century temperance and health movements, the Word of Wisdom initially counseled against the excessive use of liquor and tobacco. Although there were several sporadic attempts to enforce its prohibitions to the letter, in 1841 the leading Church authorities "concluded that it was wisdom to deal with all such matters according to the wisdom which God gave; that a forced abstinence was not making us free, but should [put us] under bondage with a yoke upon our necks" (Wilford Woodruff Journal, 7 November 1841; *History of the Church*, 2:35).

Early Church members seem to have associated references found in the Word of Wisdom to "strong drink" with distilled spirits—whiskey, rum, brandy, and gin—and "mild drink" with fermented drinks. Thus counsel regarding the use of barley for "mild drinks" appears to have been an endorsement of beer and ale, both of which are mild drinks made of barley. Certainly the example of some early Church leaders gives credence to such a view (see *HC*, 2:26,

369, 378; 6:616). The use of tobacco was apparently also tolerated and continued well into the 1870s and 1880s (see "Joseph Smith as an Administrator," master's thesis, BYU, 1969, p. 161; Brigham Young, unpub. sermon, 7 October 1862, Church Archives; Gene Sessions, *Mormon Democrat*, pp. 57-61).

Indicative of this attitude is the following letter from the First Presidency sent in 1902:

Very old men in whom the tobacco habit may have become part of their nature, and who may regard it as a great hardship to be required to abstain from its use in order to receive your recommendation to the temple, should at least be willing to curtail themselves as much as they possibly can, and promise to cleanse themselves from the tobacco odor and not to use it at all the days they do work in the temple. (First Presidency to John W. Hess, 31 October 1902, Church Archives.)

While many other Church leaders took steps to enforce the Word of Wisdom during the nineteenth century, no Church president tried to make adherence to it a test of fellowship (see *Journal of Discourses*, 7:337; 8:361; 9:35). It was not until the administration of President Joseph F. Smith that strict adherence to the Word of Wisdom began to be expected of members as it is today. Its evolution as a binding principle and test of obedience resulted primarily from the drives for Prohibition during the late 1910s and 1920s.

The beginning of this shift in emphasis is evident in the following First Presidency letter written less than seven years after the preceding one:

The rule of the Church on this question is that all who enter the temple should be observers of the Word of Wisdom. And the rule of the Church is that all of its members should receive the revelation called the Word of Wisdom, and be guided by it in their lives.

Yet tolerance toward older Church members was still stressed:

Where elderly people may be found to be more or less lacking in their observance of the Word of Wisdom, and the question of their worthiness to be recommended to the temple comes before your consideration, it is in order for [the bishop] and the Stake Presidency to consider together all such cases, deciding each on its own merits, and showing appropriate leniency to elderly people, as there can be no rigid rule for each and every case. (First Presidency to William A. Seegmiller, 26 January 1909, Church Archives.)

In fact, the Twelve themselves continued to use wine in their Thursday temple meetings as late as 1906 (John Henry Smith Journal, 5 July 1906, U of U). Questions concerning observance of the Word of Wisdom did not begin to surface in temple recommend interviews until around 1911, and did not appear in temple recommend books until the early 1920s.

The term "hot drinks" mentioned elsewhere in the Word of Wisdom was said to refer specifically to tea and coffee, but an exact definition has proved problematic. By the mid 1940s, some Church authorities had evidently decided that decaffeinated coffee did not violate the Word of Wisdom's proscriptions against "hot drinks." Similar interpretations, especially as they affect admittance to temples, have been reiterated since.

The same leniency applied to decaffeinated coffee, however, has not been extended to "Coca Cola and all other cola drinks," which Elder John Widtsoe labeled as "dangerous." He wrote, "Very few of our people drink de-caffeinated coffee, but many of them are addicted to the cola drinks" (letter, 17 September 1945). One of the most recent and repeated injunc-

tions against the use of cola drinks is that found in the *Priesthood Bulletin*, 8 February 1972, which sidestepped the issue by simply advising "against the use of any drink containing harmful habit-forming drugs under circumstances that would result in acquiring the habit."

If interpreted as prohibiting the use of all drinks or substances containing caffeine (the chief drawback of coffee and cola drinks), the Word of Wisdom would forbid:

1. Brewed coffee, which contains 100 to 150 milligrams of caffeine per cup.
2. Tea, which contains 60 to 75 milligrams of caffeine per cup.
3. Coca Cola, Mountain Dew, Tab, Pepsi, and Dr. Pepper, all of which contain more than 30 milligrams

of caffeine per 12 ounces.

4. Anacin, Cope, Vanquish, Excedrin, and No-Doz, all of which contain over 30 milligrams of caffeine per tablet.

5. Cocoa, with anywhere from 6 to 142 milligrams of caffeine per cup.

That none of the above have been explicitly forbidden indicates that Church leaders have exercised some discretion both in interpreting the Word of Wisdom and in determining which portions to emphasize. As originally interpreted, the Word of Wisdom apparently counseled against the excessive use of tobacco, except for medicinal purposes; the eating of meat, except in winter or "times of famine"; coffee and tea; distilled spirits; but allowed the moderate use of wine and other fermented

drinks. As interpreted today, the Word of Wisdom permits the use of meat and decaffeinated drinks, but strictly forbids the use of tobacco, regular coffee, black tea, various caffeinated soft drinks, hard alcohol, wine, and other fermented drinks. Interestingly, recent scientific findings indicate that some foods and beverages currently prohibited (particularly alcohol) may have some health benefits (*Science News*, 10 November 1979). If so, then perhaps the time has come to reevaluate the original interpretations of the Word of Wisdom.

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