

## TURNING THE TIME OVER TO . . .

David C. Knowlton

# OF THINGS IN THE HEAVENS, ON THE EARTH, AND IN THE CHURCH



DAN DAMM OLSEN

*If we attempt to insulate our testimonies from the rough rigors and hard facts of our past and our present we create weak, naive, insecure, and frightened testimonies. We flee and hide from serious engagement with the world, from putting our faith to the test, and deny the very validity of our testimonies, their ability to raise us to salvation.*

I SPEAK TO you with tremendously mixed feelings. I feel angry, frustrated, hurt, troubled, and afraid. When I was hired at BYU, I enquired carefully about the problems with intellectual freedom that I was told existed there. In my interview, Associate Aca-

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dem Vice President Dennis Thompson promised me that as long as I taught and researched as best I could the material of my field the university would stand behind me and support me. He also said that I should develop a thick skin because I might receive calls from concerned apostles, but not to worry because I would have the university's backing.

Furthermore, when Elder John Carmack interviewed me as part of the employment process, he spent a lot of time assessing my feelings about various intellectual subjects, such as archaeology and the Book of Mormon. I had the pleasure of letting him

argue against the Book of Mormon from the perspective of mainstream archaeology—something that is not in my area of expertise since I am a social anthropologist. While he argued that there was no archaeological support for the Book of Mormon, I simply stated that one should take the promise in Moroni 10:4-5 seriously: if one has a spiritual confirmation of the value of that standard work, the empirical details of its production have only a secondary importance.

I suspect he was a little flabbergasted by my approach. It seemed that he was looking for a good argument, as his brother is a prominent anthropologist who has left the Church because, Elder Carmack asserted, of the weakness of empirical claims for the Book of Mormon. Elder Carmack reviewed BYU's honor code with me and then informed me that I should simply do my best in my field, knowing full well that at times the truths of the social sciences will enter into conflict with any secular or religious ideology. In fact, the sociology or anthropology of knowledge is so powerful that it even relativizes and undercuts the truth claims of the rest of the social sciences.

To practice social science is to make a Faustian bargain. On the one hand, social scientists enjoy the tremendous pleasures of engaging the fundamental questions and processes of human life—how we create ourselves and how our many entrenched and often sacralized platitudes justify our social existence. Although many of us are confirmed humanists, dedicating our professional lives to valuing and comprehending our fellow beings and their way of life, our work makes humankind seem tiny indeed. As a result, our own way of life becomes relative and contingent, just one of many possible ways of being human. This is one of the costs. The psychological price is at times so great that we flee it and build barriers to the full development of our scientific reasoning because it undercuts the simple security of unreflected and untrammelled existence.

If this is an existential difficulty for us social scientists, it is even more an issue for the communities which host us. Last year, under the sponsorship of the Fulbright commission, I taught a graduate anthropology seminar in the sophisticated and urbane city of Buenos Aires, Argentina. This program was formed to help replace the generation of scholars who disappeared in the dirty wars from the late sixties through the early eighties. Many scholars and students learned how threatening social science had become to a social order which attempted to defend itself by force and repression, rather than by argu-

ment and discussion, when they heard a terrifying dry knock on their doors at night.

Social science is dangerous, both to its practitioners and its hosts. But can we afford, in this complex and modern world we inhabit, to live without it? I think not. Even if it is problematic, it provides us with the means to cogently approach our problems and to understand ourselves. But we must build our testimonies of self on solid foundations, as solid as possible, to withstand its gaze which will also magnify our faults and the unstable foundations of our faith. We could decide to stamp it out inside our community, but it will continue outside our boundaries and then will appear to us all the more devastating because we have not learned to use its double-edged sword for our benefit.

MY phone rang dryly, early one Thursday morning this August. I hazily answered and was suddenly awakened fully by the tight voice of my stake president. He said, more or less, "The general authorities have asked me to interview you concerning your recent Sunstone symposium presentation. Will you meet me at my offices on Sunday morning, and will you bring your paper so that we might discuss it?" Although I felt like saying no, because I deeply feel that the request was illegitimate and an abuse of power and authority, I agreed to comply.

We argued gently and respectfully about the benefit or harm Sunstone creates, and about public discussion of the temple, even though I have yet to do a public analysis of the temple service, something which definitely falls within my professional purview and should be covered by the guarantees both Vice President Thompson and Elder Carmack provided me. When we arrived, in the course of our long and, at times, emotionally tense conversation, at my talk of terrorism and the Church in South America, neither my stake president nor I could understand why the Brethren were troubled by what I had said. We parted amicably, even though I informed him that as a professional anthropologist, I could not ethically accept any order of blanket censorship. I was and am willing to consider particulars, which because of specific sensitivities might be better left undiscussed for a certain length of time. But cogent justifications must be presented to me and those do not include the favorite "because I told you so" of threatened parents when faced with an obstinate child's, "Why?"

I still do not know why the Brethren were

concerned with my presentation. I would like to know. I am, however, concerned that they have not answered my queries for information; I am also concerned about gossip which reports they were very angry at my requests, saying, "when the Church has spoken that should be the end of it." This is a delicate situation because there is a tremendous national lobby supporting the academic freedom of professors. Further, it is simply a bad habit for authorities to engage in generalized

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intimidation, such as having people called to discuss their academic works in an ecclesiastical forum. This behavior damages both BYU and the Church because it triggers the attention of the press and the external lobbies and only gives us a black eye nationally.

I have no difficulty with the Brethren's sphere of authority. They lead the institutional Church, not I. They speak prophetically to the entire Church, not I. They bear the responsibility of carefully seeking inspiration to deal with the enormous problems of a world-wide church, not I. Furthermore, I support them in their callings and responsibilities. I gather that we differ as to what the word "support" means. For me, any doctrine that argues for apostolic or prophetic infallibility, or which calls for automatic, blind obedience, is unacceptable and inherently illegitimate. That is not the Mormonism I inherited from my parents and ancestors, nor that which the Spirit whispers to my soul. I do not see this view as in any way challenging the Brethren or being disloyal or un-supportive. It merely reaffirms the free agency we all fought for in the War in Heaven.

I agree with Elder Boyd K. Packer's October general conference address on the dangers

of measuring the Church with the intellect without leavening our discourse with testimony. If space allowed, I could develop a long anthropological argument in support of his statement. But the converse—testimony without intellect—is also dangerous. Testimonies and intellect must constantly challenge and stimulate the other as alternate ways of knowing. Without both, our faith can never grow; without both, we open ourselves to all the critiques Christ makes in the New Testament of empty, formal orthodoxy. Furthermore, as in the case of Elder Carmack's Book of Mormon, if we allow our testimony to accept uncritically all the nonsense common among us, about this or that so-called "proof" of the Book of Mormon, then we set ourselves up for a fall. Any well-trained secular archaeologist can devastate our "testimony" because we have set it up on sand.

While there are serious epistemological and existential difficulties in holding religious faith and scientific rigor simultaneously, nevertheless, the hollow dualism—the contrast between science and religion that is all too common among us—is unnecessary. Our fears stem from not taking our faith and testimony seriously enough and from not accepting the challenge of intellectual examination of our presuppositions.

Empirical truths—dubious though that word may be philosophically, it is less dubious, logically, than our ritual affirmation of the "truth" of the Church—like those hidden in the First Presidency vaults, merely stimulate our search for testimony. They raise questions which simultaneously encourage our search for learning and enable our testimonies to grow. I agree with Malcolm Muggeridge that faith requires doubt. To paraphrase the Apostle James, faith without doubt is dead, in that it is unexamined, static, hollow, and insecure. If we attempt to insulate our testimonies from the rough rigors and hard facts of our past and our present, or from the challenges of our intellects, we create weak, naive, insecure, and frightened testimonies. Like hothouse flowers, they will never survive the storms of natural life. We flee and hide from serious engagement with the world, from putting our faith to the test. Thereby we deny the very validity of our testimonies, their ability to raise us to salvation.

I disagree strongly with the notion that we intellectuals form some kind of "alternate voice." The term alternate suggests that we occupy a similar space with that of the institutional Church, perhaps, or form a competi-

tive voice with the Brethren. We do not! We are a different voice, operating in spaces appropriate for us. Thereby we enrich the community. Were it not for Mormon intellectuals who taught me that it was okay to ask questions, that it was not necessarily devastating to one's testimony to feel doubt, that it was okay to think and to stand proudly but humbly as an intellectual, as someone who has to think because it is simply a part of the makeup of his soul, I would have long since been forced out of the Church by the rabid anti-intellectualism I experienced growing up and continue to experience.

As I told my stake president, I wish you could sit in my office at BYU and hear the heart-felt struggles of young students who come upon questions, who arrive at doubt, who try to accommodate their testimonies to the rigor of academic life. I wish you could sense the pain, the emotion, the worry, the fear, the anguish, particularly when so many of their teachers and peers see their feelings as illegitimate or apostate. The first thing they usually tell these students is, "I am worried about you." These are ominous words for struggling young Mormons.

THE Church comprises at least two distinct things. There is the institutional Church, with its authorities, bureaucracies, and procedures. And there is the body of believers. Each has different, although conjoined, interests and responsibilities. They co-exist in a creative and dynamic tension. While the institutional Church includes, perforce, hierarchy, authority, and exclusivity, the body of believers should be an open, inclusive, egalitarian community of individuals who stand before God as imperfect, searching, striving, struggling souls.

The institution is like a multinational corporation, with its own ends, purposes, and needs. These are seldom identical with those of its members. The Church as a community is a society where people learn to live together, to place their faith into practice, to share the joys and sorrows of existence with others. While the institution has the obligation to carry to the world the gospel, whatever that vague word may yet come to mean, we, the community, have a somewhat different set of obligations, namely to live, to have joy, to be fruitful, to love one another, and above all to love the Lord. We also have the scripturally based right and duty to grow and learn through thought, soul searching, and prayer. To be sure, from an institutional point of view

this seems anarchic. Therefore, institutions like our church, the behemoth Catholic Church, and others place limits and constraints from the institution's perspective on doctrinal and mystical development, lest it challenge the teaching and organizational authority of the institution.

Yet the Catholic theologian Gustavo

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Gutierrez has written that ultimately theology belongs to the people. I agree. In the final analysis, our doctrine, our history, our lives belong to us as children of God. We alone bear the responsibility for acting within our societies to understand life and eternity and ultimately to attain exaltation. Nevertheless, we have checks and balances. We have prophets to speak to the community and constrain it. We have an institution to force us together and remind us of our eternal responsibilities. We have a world of voices to push us and pull us in multiple directions. We finally have the anarchy of spiritual yearnings and private thoughts. Together these work to keep us moving forward. But if any part of the system of checks and balances refuses another, then the whole complex system is thrown out of whack.

When we think of the Church as a family community of sisters and brothers, we conceive a society where everyone has different

talents, and the development of those talents makes a contribution to the whole. We thereby envision a public domain where artists, intellectuals, and writers of all sorts can act meaningfully, as part of the community, to enliven and enrich as well as challenge and stimulate its life. We also have a world of numerous occupations and lifestyles, fads and fashion, pompous, pretentious, and quiet, humble people, each with a different perspective and position, who challenge one another with their differences. These differences enable us to ask how we all can be children of God and sanctify our lives, even though our opinions and styles inherently challenge each other's shibboleths. In sum, we have a complex society, like God intended us to have, whose richness cannot be measured by simple canons of narrow orthodoxy, but by its diversity and love, that is, by its ability to meet the challenge to love one another no matter what.

I WONDER why we are afraid of the truth. Philosophically, that word is extremely difficult. Anyone who thinks the truth has the simplicity and concreteness of a rounded river stone should read epistemology, where the stone may become a chimera when challenged by the starchy paper of cautious reasoning. Nevertheless, we should embrace all things, even the problems and difficulties of our past and present.

I further wonder why criticism is often seen as disloyal and contentious. Doesn't Proverbs say something about harsh words from a friend being more faithful than the kisses from an enemy (Proverbs 27:6)? Following that line of reasoning, the highest form of flattery is not brown-nosing sycophancy, but engaging criticism and debate. We intellectuals have an important role to play, both within the Church as community and as institution. We raise issues, comfortable and uncomfortable ones, for public discussion and debate. We provide a forum for loyal criticism, for the floating of trial balloons for the escape of tensions, and for the flow of information through multiple channels. But we must do so humbly, always realizing the tenuousness of our thought, its inherent imprecision, and social instability. Let the prophets speak dogmatically. Let us take their words into consideration and speak with all the humility and caution required by the intellectual life.

I further wonder why so many hold that if you are not "one-hundred percent for us you're agin' us." By letting ourselves become

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thus polarized we do away with the critical middle ground which keeps us from alienation and isolation. When groups are under pressure they frequently create an enemy to unite their fractious populace. Often this tactic is a sign of desperation, particularly when they attack friends instead of dealing with the real, concrete problems afflicting their community. We should actively avoid and refuse polarization.

WE intellectuals should furthermore stop looking over our shoulders to see if the Brethren are going to disagree with us, call us to repentance, hassle us, limit our access to information, or challenge us. In many ways that is their job—although it is indeed ours to critique all those actions. It is also our job to protect ourselves and argue for what we think important. We should act with security of purpose as thoughtful people who have a necessary role to play within the Church as community. Someday historians will explore the development of Mormon letters and the cross fertilization between them and the official Church. Someday people will quote with reverence the ancient texts from *Dialogue*, *SUNSTONE*, the *Journal of Mormon History*, *Exponent II*, the Mormon Women's Forum, the B. H. Roberts Society, *BYU Studies*, *F.A.R.M.S.*, and the *Ensign*, among others. These will become our treasure, our challenge, our heritage, and our wealth. We have an obligation to past and future generations to magnify and expand our talents and our thoughts.

We further should act with security vis à vis our peers in the non-Mormon academic world. Mormon studies is as legitimate as any other area of intellectual endeavor. Not only do I do Mormon studies, I also work in Bolivia. No one would question Bolivian studies. The bookstores and libraries of La Paz are filled with a wide variety of studies, essays, and stories about Bolivia. Yet there are probably more Mormons in the world than there are Bolivians. We need no one to give us permission, nor are we self-appointed. The reflection on our community and its experience is our birthright both as human beings and as members of the community.


Some may try to use Church disciplinary councils, as Church spokesperson Don LeFevre is reported to have intimated, to silence independent voices which dissent, disagree, or even differ. Let them. They only weaken themselves by such silliness. One recently elected Latin American president said, when he spoke to his beloved people,

"My advisors tell me I shouldn't mingle with you or speak openly to you from this balcony. They say the terrorists might kill me. I say so what! If someone knocks me from the bicycle of state, another will rise up, mount the bike and continue riding it down the path we have chosen."

The days when an (un)holy inquisition was politically or socially feasible or acceptable are long past. The horses of Mormon studies are long loosed from the stable and now wander grazing and galloping far abroad. We do not need permission nor official acceptance. Some facts may make life difficult for us, but we should go forward, secure in the knowledge that we have done nothing wrong. Our ponies will carry us on a tremendous exploration and adventure through our society, no matter what others opine. It is too late by at least twenty or thirty years for us to be silenced.

One final point. We intellectuals face the temptation to surround ourselves and glory in the trappings of intelligence and learning. All too often we forget faith, testimony, and spirituality. I agree with Elder Packer; the one can never replace the other. We further need never apologize to our intellectual peers for having faith or for choosing to believe in God or for belonging to the Church. Those who would have us do so are philosophical fools and are easily challenged with the tools of the sociology of knowledge. Nor need we apologize for thinking and questioning what others set off as sacrosanct. We merely need cope with the tensions this will produce and proceed forward with honesty, integrity, rigor, and lots of humble prayer. In sum, we need merely clothe ourselves in the vision of section 88 of the Doctrine and Covenants, particularly verses 76-80:

Also I give unto you a commandment that ye shall continue in prayer and fasting from this time forth. And I give unto you a commandment that you shall teach one another the doctrine of the kingdom. Teach ye diligently and my grace shall attend you, that you may be instructed more perfectly in theory, in principle, in doctrine, in the law of the gospel, in all things that pertain unto the kingdom of God, that are expedient for you to understand; Of things both in heaven and earth, and under the earth; things which have been, things which are, things which must shortly come to pass; things which are at home, things which are abroad; the wars and the perplexities of nations, and the judgments which are on the land; and a knowledge also of countries and of kingdoms—That ye may be prepared in all things when I shall send you again to magnify the calling whereunto I have called you, and the mission with which I have commissioned you.

And the ever fresh thirteenth article of faith: We believe in being honest, true, chaste, benevolent, virtuous, and in doing good to all men; indeed, we may say that we follow the admonition of Paul—We believe all things, we hope all things, we have endured many things, and hope to be able to endure all things. If there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy, we seek after these things. 

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#### THE LORD'S SUPPER

He said, do this in memory of him.  
But when I tear this loaf my heart withstands  
Its duty and, like water, streams in prim  
Images of the housekeeper whose hands  
Carefully rolled a snake of dough in flour  
And fired the stone oven, swept out the ash,  
Who sang hallels as she split ripe and sour  
Palm dates and figs into a bowl of mash,  
Into which two at once could dip their hand.  
How could this woman have known what would come  
Of this, how she would nourish a command  
To contemplate what God exacts of some:  
A ceremony of clean cups and trays  
And then the hard vigil of grief and praise.

—MICHAEL HICKS