

FROM THE EDITOR

ON BEING “INVESTIGATOR-SAFE”

By Dan Wotherspoon

Two experiences have had me thinking lately.

EXPERIENCE 1: In making several new acquaintances at the recent Association for Mormon Letters annual meeting, I was asked about Sunstone’s mixed reputation among Church members. Perhaps it was the way the question was posed, somehow differently than in the past, but I found myself answering it with an angle I hadn’t really tried before. In essence, I speculated that I feared that too often people will hear that something was printed in the magazine or said at a symposium that would be worrisome if it were the “first thing” someone would hear about Mormonism or the Church. In other words, Sunstone forums are not to be trusted because they’re not “safe” for investigators.

EXPERIENCE 2: Just a week ago, I was merrily lurking on the LDS-Phil email list, reading the various discussions, noting interesting ideas or jotting down potential angles of response for when and if I found the time to participate more actively. LDS-Phil is a list of some 120 or so members, most formally trained or good, though non-professional, philosophers and theologians. In the middle of a discussion that had been prompted initially by a non-LDS participant, a post appeared that startled me because of the way it began: “Sorry for butting in, but I have been skimming through this thread just to see what kind of missionary work we’re doing on the net.”

GOOD conversations at the AML conference followed when I responded the way I did. And, as we discussed Sunstone a bit more, both my conversation partners and I agreed that it isn’t fair to ask that every discussion that takes place everywhere in Mormonism be “investigator safe.” And for forums such as Sunstone—whose constituency, as our recent survey suggests, is made up primarily of Latter-day Saints who are college-educated (89 percent with bachelor’s degrees or more), who are active or formerly active Latter-day Saints (94 percent), and who are not newbies to our discussions (90 percent)¹—it would be especially bur-

densome to ask all of our articles and symposium presentations to be bound by an implied “Careful: remember potential converts may be listening.”

A good exchange also followed from my response to the LDS-Phil post described above. Out of curiosity, and also because my AML conversations were still in the back of my mind, I queried list members if, when posting to the list, they ever worried about what someone investigating the Church might think were they to read their posts. I especially wanted to learn if such a concern ever inhibited them from posting an imaginative or speculative thought they otherwise might have liked “to put out there” for response. A few list members bit on my invitation to share their thoughts, saying essentially that no, they hadn’t really considered potential missionary opportunities when they participated in the LDS-Phil discussion.

Just as in my AML discussions, I was relieved to have additional confirmation that people I respect and enjoy also believe that claiming a space for more adventurous conversations about gospel and Church topics is a perfectly acceptable thing to do. I believe they, just as I do, would qualify their affirmation by stating that there still need to be ground rules for the conversations. For instance, we should feel free to speak honestly but always remain respectful of other positions. We must begin with the assumption that faith matters and should be honored, and even as we offer critiques, we need to make our constructive intentions as transparent as possible. (Sorry. So far, these principles are well-worn ground in Sunstone discussions, I know.)

But one response to my LDS-Phil post came at my query from an interesting angle, one worthy of more reflection. From good friend Charles Randall Paul (Randy):

I usually have someone in mind who I am trying to persuade to see things more the way I do. This someone is often a composite of people on this list and others I have met who have challenged me. For example, I always seem to wrestle with an invisible Bruce Lincoln, a brilliant Marxist critic at Chicago, who goads me to try to per-

suaude him that all is not reduced to social/economic power and self interest. I once wrote out a list of fifteen books and/or authors who I think most influenced me for good. I often write trying to persuade those authors (as if they were observing) that I have honored their way of thinking and doing. I also find myself trying to persuade the Lord that my view on something is one He really enjoys more than most.

This last bit, about trying to persuade the Lord, is quintessential Randy—an idea deeply embedded in his larger and wonderful views about mutual persuasion in mediating interreligious conflict—but I don’t want to focus there.² Instead, I’m excited about notions Randy’s post implies that I believe might be helpful to forums such as Sunstone—forums that are mostly-insider-but-still-public. (I say “mostly insider” because some folks really *might* be listening in for whom our discussions are a first brush with Mormonism.) I think Randy’s approach could help us move toward constructive discourse without having our impulses checked so much by “rules of engagement” as by our hope to honor the ways of thinking and doing of those who have influenced us for good. There’s a tinge of “What would Jesus do?” in this idea, but I think it has much more to it.

AS our recent symposium survey revealed, most of us listening in to Sunstone discussions have had at least some college experience. To get to the point I’m moving toward, I’ll mention one aspect of my college experience that I’m certain others have also reflected upon but which is worth highlighting. It is the transformation from being a learner to becoming a contributor, from being a student to becoming a teacher.

Fairly early on in my BYU experience, I sensed that whatever I might want to do with my life and career would involve having to go to graduate school. And that thought scared me because I knew graduate students had to write—a lot. The writing itself didn’t really worry me as much as the question, *What is there to write about that could feel new and interesting?* This idea must have been on my mind for a while because I somehow stumbingly mentioned it to one of my favorite professors, Tom MacKay, who broke into a great big smile. “Don’t worry,” he assured me, “when you start taking more classes in your field, you’ll find plenty of interesting things to write about—too many, in fact!” He then hinted that the key to un-

locking the floodgates lay in our own autobiographies. "We all come at the world and issues from different angles. Your upper-division and graduate courses will show you that, and you'll gain confidence that you have plenty to say."

And he was right. Once we push past the broad survey part of an academic subject, it all breaks open. And then everything from our basic temperaments, to whom we've been reading or what two or three classes we've been taking that happened to cross-fertilize, to personal relationships with fellow students, to family or other loyalties, all combine to create perspectives that can advance the discussion. And that's what graduate seminars, especially, are all about—identifying those places in the field where our particular sensitivities or idiosyncratic twists of mind might contribute, and then learning how to present our ideas persuasively while still honoring the scholarship and standards of the field and the people whose work has influenced our thinking.

I loved that process of first learning and then learning to contribute back. Each class, each seminar, brought new somethings and someones into my universe, and in speaking up, I gave newness back. I still love this process! Each essay, article, story, poem, play, letter, or symposium presentation brings angles and quirky calculus, other brains and the souls operating those brains into my personal galaxy, and through my editing nudges (usually gentle, but not always!), or my reactions and questions, I get to give back to the whole. Just as my wife feared I wouldn't, I've never left school!

I AM certainly not suggesting that organizations such as Sunstone, AML, LDS-Phil, and other independent forums are the perfect or only settings for Mormon "graduate studies," but much like graduate

seminars, the forums they create give us a chance to discuss ideas in ways we don't often get to in official Church settings where there is a justifiable pressing concern for meeting the basic needs of investigators or new converts. Still, though, how do we walk that line of making our discussions interesting and primarily for the already-understand-the-basics folks while not ignoring the possibility that, because we're public groups, some might be meeting Latter-day Saintness (Saintliness?) through us for the first time?

I believe Randy Paul's post suggests a good approach: We think of those we are discussing things with as intelligent friends, people of good will who've caught our attention with interesting questions or ways of being in the world. Because we respect them and the ways their life experiences have shaped their minds and souls, we try to contribute something new for them to consider—whether it is an idea, a practice, or a general challenge to broaden their horizons by simply sharing our particular story that might not track with their previous conceptions of things. And we try to persuade them in the spirit, mode of life, and careful methods of those we most admire, those who've best been able to break through to touch *our* individual heart and soul. If we keep these things in mind, I think it will be pretty hard to go wrong.

Hang on! Maybe the conclusion I was heading toward is more along the lines of "What would Jesus do?" after all! ☺

NOTES

1. See SUNSTONE (December 2003), 6–7.
2. Charles Randall Paul is the president of the Foundation for Interreligious Diplomacy. A glimpse of his approach to interacting with others in a stance of loving persuasion can be found in his article, "Does God Always Reveal the Same Thing to Everyone? On Sustaining Peaceful Contests over Religion," SUNSTONE (May 2003): 58–63.



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