

**Excessive Future Orientation –  
A Side Effect of Mormonism's Controlling Culture**

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Too much emphasis within Mormonism is placed on the literality and wonder of the Celestial Kingdom, and what we need to do to get there. The first and foremost requirement in this regard is obedience to the changing dictates of Mormon leaders. This results in a mentality that spends a great deal of effort in the present fearfully focused on the eternal consequences of what goes on around us, and largely prevents us from engaging the reality of our life experience.

For example, while I was an obedient Mormon it was difficult for me to simply appreciate the company of a non-member friend because I was ever conscious of my duty to convert that friend to Mormonism, and many of my actions relative to him would be influenced by that duty. This caused me to often act inauthentically toward people with whom I otherwise could have perhaps become truly friendly. Likewise, I had difficulty communicating in any way to family members without trying to influence their behavior toward more obedience to the Church's requirements. This was a result of my being constantly aware of the fact that if members of my family did not become adequately obedient, we would not be able to enjoy each other's company in the Celestial Kingdom. The first function of my life was to obey the myriad rules required for entrance into the Celestial Kingdom, and the second was to do all that was reasonably possible to cause those within my circle of influence, and particularly my family, to do the same.

And what do Church members do when they get together at Church meetings? While there is often an activity of some kind to act as a framework, the purpose of getting together is to encourage each other to be more obedient to the Church's teachings and attend more meetings that will have the same purpose. Church members also spend significant amounts of effort trying to cause inactive members and non-members to become part of the above-described cycle. Elder Boyd Packer, an Apostle, succinctly described this concept in a leadership training meeting I once attended by saying that the purpose of everything we do as Church members is to encourage ourselves and others to make and keep covenants, which is to say, submit obediently to Church authority. Hence, Mormons spend an incredible amount of time and energy reassuring each other that they belong to god's only "true" church, and encouraging each other to come to more meetings the purpose of which is to again repeat that message. Rituals that Mormons are instructed to follow in their homes are designed for the same purpose, including daily scripture reading (personal and in family groups), daily prayers (personal, spousal and family group on a twice daily basis, plus at every meal), family home evening family once a week, parent-child "interviews", etc.

I have reached the conclusion that the Mormon way of life I have just described is inimical to what I have recently discovered to be real spirituality. Spirituality requires much more awareness of the present than an obedient, committed Mormon life style permits. The Mormon way of life, with its obsessive focus on obedience to commandments that are purportedly required to gain admittance after death into the Celestial Kingdom, causes us to largely endure the present as an endless series of temptations that may cause us to lose our hoped for prize if they are not successfully

resisted. Hence, much of the opportunity we have to live this life, and enjoy what it has to offer, is squandered.

Much has been written respecting "future orientation" problems in western culture. As the South American writer Octavio Paz has put it:

Whoever builds a house for future happiness builds a prison for the present.

Therein lie many of Mormonism's problems. On the other hand, I am quick to admit that psychologists such as Dr. Martin Seligman, one of North America's leading experts respecting the psychology of happiness, tell us that a degree of future mindedness is essential not only to happiness, but to mental well being. That is, those who are too oriented toward the past or present sometimes have problems placing their difficulties in context. This exposes them to problems related to depression, and inhibits the making of plans that will motivate constructive action in the present. It seems, therefore, that the trick we need to perform is that of finding an appropriate balance and toning down the fear of the present that Mormonism tends to inculcate. Mormons don't so much make healthy future oriented goals as the numb themselves to the present by analyzing it almost exclusively in terms of how it will affect their Celestial possibilities. For example, despite the joy that the spiritual changes I have recently made have brought into my life, and the fact that my children and wife say that I am a better father and husband now than ever, my parents are heart broken because I have disqualified myself for life with them in the Celestial Kingdom.

The antidote often suggested for those westerners who have an excessive future orientation is a greater focus on the present, as taught by Buddhist and other eastern oriented theorists. Ironically, one of the first places I run into this approach was at a leadership-training program sponsored by BYU that I attended as the president of our local chapter of the Marriott School of Management Society. I don't think the folks who made the presentation understood where the path down which they point leads. They advocated that we no longer permit ourselves to be "human doings", and that we revert to our natural state, that of "human beings" – that we "just be". But once I "just was" for a while, I started to feel things that are decidedly counterproductive if one wishes to remain a faithful member of the Mormon Church because it works hard to make us into human doings who do not think enough to question. My guess is that this program, like many others that are proven to lead sheep out of the fold, will be discontinued by BYU if it has not already been. It is my experience that if the Church finds that a program leads members away, the program will be discouraged despite all of the good things it may do. This was the case with some popular, and in many ways effective, weekend long group therapy programs with which I became familiar in the 1980s. Dr. Scott Peck ("The Road Less Traveled", etc.) was one of the leading proponents of these. While I served as Bishop I received a letter from the First Presidency that counseled me to specifically discourage the members of our Ward from participating in such programs because of the manner in which participation seemed to lead members to question their devotion to the Church. I have learned quite a bit about such programs since then, and believe them to be worthwhile endeavors for many types of people. But they do create enough emotional energy to cause even faithful Mormons to question their Mormon worldview, and hence it is not surprising that the Church would discourage them. This is another example of Church advice formulated based on the preservation of control instead of what is in the best interest of individual members.

I have found the "just be" approach, supplemented with what I have learned about Buddhism and meditation, to be most helpful. The present has opened up to me as I have suppressed my Mormon induced, overly future oriented mindset. I now spend no energy or time worrying whether this or that aspect of my behavior or that of my loved ones might disentitle us to Celestial Kingdom. And I spend much more energy than before on noticing the light glancing off my grandson's hair, the beauty of my daughter as she walks through our yard on her way to do something that I might have been concerned about a while ago because it could threaten her "eternal salvation", and the expression on my wife's face as she listens to something our nine-year-old son thinks is of earth shattering importance.

So what causes this Mormon future mindedness? There is a correlation between societies created in harsh environments and what seem to us now like an excessive future orientation. This should not be surprising. Future mindedness helps us cope with difficult present circumstances, and to set goals that will motivate current activity to improve those circumstances. Both of these are helpful, if not essential, characteristics in a harsh environment. Octavio Paz, who so nicely defined this problem as noted above, is a South American. He hence is familiar with an economic environment much more harsh than ours.

We should not be surprised that early Mormons were future oriented, as were many of their contemporaries. The interesting question is why Mormons have retained their future mindedness to a greater extent than most of the rest of western society. It is my view that this is due to the authoritarian and extremely conservative nature of the Mormon Church and the culture it creates.

As noted above, harsh environments create authoritarian religious and other organizations, as well as future mindedness. And once human authority is well established, it tends to perpetuate itself. Mormon leadership has proven adept at this task. One of their major tools in this regard is a belief system that makes the members feel that the Mormon Church is indispensable to their eternal salvation. This is a classic future-minded ploy. "Don't do what you want to and so 'enjoy' this moment," the Mormon leaders say. "Do what we say you must, or you will lose your chance to live after death with your loved ones in the Celestial Kingdom." And as noted above, what the members must do involves using their time and resources to engrain obedience to the Church in themselves, their family members, the other members of their Ward and Stake, and non-members through the missionary efforts they make. All of this combines to make it difficult for the present to be appreciated because it is filled with concerns about a speculative future.

I can hear some of my Mormon friends saying, "Come on Bob. We grant you that the Church is conservative. That is a problem. No argument there. But when did the Church ever tell you not to enjoy the moment? That is a real stretch." So a concrete example or two are in order to help bring this important point home.

I suggest that if there is any time at which one should be "in the moment" it is while making love. The fact that Mormon leaders have from time to time purported to dictate the minutiae of love making, and that the behavior of members such as me has been significantly affected by their counsel, should provide ample proof of the degree to which they seek to control Mormon lives.

My wife and I married in 1980. One of the things that we were told by Church leaders during the interviews through which we had to pass to receive permission to be married in the temple was that we were to wear our temple garments "night and day" – that is, all of the time. I was told during my mission that the Church leaders taught that wearing garments "night and day" meant that garments were to be worn while making love, which although technically possible would take a lot of the – ahem – romance out of the event. I was also told that some members of the Church of the more rebellious variety refused to wear their garments during their most intimate moments with their spouses, but that many did. Since then, I have met some who do. And only a few days ago I heard a member of my own extended family who is one generation older than me, wonder out loud why a young bride she knew was buying lingerie. "How is that going to look with her garments on?", was the core of her concern. She was baffled by this behavior. This woman is intelligent, well informed respecting most things and capable in the extreme, and has passed a lifetime in Church leadership within the Relief Society and Young Women's organizations including numerous stints as the president of both Stake and Ward auxiliaries. It is a shame that her Mormon experience has left her awkward enough in her own skin to make such a statement. What a tragedy this is. She has been robbed of a significant part of one of life's most potentially meaningful experiences, and is so insulated from reality that she is completely unaware of what has been taken from her. And I can only speculate as to the psychological baggage she carries as a result of the mindset the above comment indicates, and how that would also likely have impeded her ability to be intimate with her husband.

I enquired respecting the "clothed while having sex" matter of my Church leaders just before our marriage, and was told that while the Church used to teach that garments must be worn while making love, that it was now acknowledged to be OK to take them off as long as they were put back on before going to sleep. Otherwise, the promise made in the temple to wear the garments "night and day" would be broken. I was so relieved that my garments could be removed for lovemaking that I did not question the ludicrous nature of the "put them back on" requirement. And so throughout my married life, one of existences' greatest pleasures – that of laying peacefully in my wife's arms after intimacy – has mostly been interrupted by what is in effect a religious ritual in the form of the requirement that sleep must be resisted until my garments have been put back on. And I can remember awakening on numerous occasions with a jerk and a feeling of guilt after dozing off with my wife in my arms, and then climbing out of bed to put my garments on. I am shaking my head as I type these words. The ability of the Mormon Church to control this kind of intimate behavior between married people is astonishing.

The Church's intervention respecting intimate behavior between spouses goes much further than what I have just indicated. A letter dated June 9, 1978 from the First Presidency of the Church to various Church leaders instructs that interviews of married persons for the purposes of temple recommends etc.: "should scrupulously avoid indelicate inquiries," yet also emphasizes:

Married persons should understand that if in their marital relations they are guilty of unnatural, impure or unholy practices, they should not enter the temple unless and until they repent and discontinue any such practices.

This letter put Bishops in a delicate position, and was in force when my wife and I married in 1980. Our Bishop told us that the letter likely meant that certain sexual acts, such as oral sex or "unnatural sexual positions", were not pleasing to god. Hmm. What does that do for a young, recently virgin couple (as we both were) as they climb into bed together while trying to adjust to the novelty of sexual life? Let me assure you that this did not help us to make that adjustment.

Then on January 5, 1982 the First Presidency repeated its 1978 instructions for "interviewing married persons," but added:

The First Presidency has interpreted oral sex as constituting an unnatural, impure or unholy practice.

We also heard about this from our well-intentioned Bishop. So, what happens when a married Mormon couple feel inclined, while in the heat of passion, to do something that might be "unnatural", whatever that means? Do you stop to debate what "unnatural" means? Try doing something that might be "unnatural" with the specter of not making it into the Celestial Kingdom as a result hanging over your head. Good love making is hard enough to achieve for a couple with the responsibilities most Mormons in terms of kids, work, community service etc. without making it more difficult, and the Church has done that in spades.

Let me suggest that sexual advice emanating from Mormon leaders is not conducive to "staying in the moment" while in the bedroom, and that their advice in other spheres is equally inconsistent with appreciating the wonders the present has to offer. And to ensure that I am not misunderstood on this point, let me make it clear that I do not so much complain specifically about the Church's intervention in its members' sexual lives as I use that to establish that the Church has been effective in interrupting one of the most intense and primal of human activities, as well as a million other aspects of our lives that are nowhere as difficult for the Church to control. This should give pause to those who have not noticed how pervasive the Church's influence is in their lives, and provide a reason to take inventory.

Mormons in my view have much more trouble than they should enjoying the present, and the manner in which their religious beliefs direct their attention a speculative, wonderful future in the Celestial Kingdom is in my view responsible for most of this.