

A Conversation with a Mormon Leader

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November 20, 2004

<http://mccue.cc/bob/spirituality.htm>

What a man believes upon grossly insufficient evidence is an index into his desires -- desires of which he himself is often unconscious. If a man is offered a fact which goes against his instincts, he will scrutinize it closely, and unless the evidence is overwhelming, he will refuse to believe it. If, on the other hand, he is offered something which affords a reason for acting in accordance to his instincts, he will accept it even on the slightest evidence. The origin of myths is explained in this way. Bertrand Russell

Introduction

What follows is a lightly edited transcript of part of an email exchange in which I recently engaged with an old friend who is a Mormon leader. I generally resist the temptation to use my time for this kind of thing, but for a variety of reasons that I will not go into here, I did not resist in this case.

What follows has been edited to protect my friend's confidentiality. His initial letter to me, among other things, took me to task for not leaving people we know alone to walk their path as I walk mine; for persecuting the Saints; for being too sure of myself; and expressed the hope that we would continue to be friends.

And lest anyone think I am beating up someone who can't take it, rest assured that this is not the case. This person gives and takes as well as I do, which is why you see here a frank expression of my perceptions instead of the more polite, "elephant in the corner" kind of communication that so often characterizes my interaction with LDS people.

What follows are my first long response to my friend, and then another shorter response I provided to a later email from him.

I had not planned on putting this correspondence on my website, but did post it on a bulletin board. The response it drew there indicated that the information I summarized for my friend is useful to others in ways I am certain it is not to him.

The First Letter

Dear *:

We have both likely chewed up more of our day than we should already with this stuff, but I will reply while the iron is hot, so to speak, and then let this sit. I just re-read what I have written and am amazed by its length and intensity. Your position of authority, I think, touches a nerve with me that draws more energy that is perhaps merited by what you wrote. If so, I apologize in advance. The only other people to whom I have respond in many months in this way are my parents, and for similar reasons - it is a question of how close to the source of power in the conditioning system they were. At least you are in select company.

Thank you for your offer of continued friendship, and I am happy to reciprocate. There is a rub, however. I am a very open person. I don't sneak around, and by saying this do not suggest that you do. But some people are better at holding their cards close to their vest than others. I am not very good at that and do not intend to improve my skills in that regard.. And so if we are to communicate in any more than the most perfunctory of ways, you will have to tolerate listening to my views on things respecting which we have deep disagreement. I have found that most faithful Mormons do not tolerate that well. I will outline a few of those views by way of response to your last email, and conclude with a suggestion as to how we might go forward. I patched this together between meetings this afternoon.

Yes, I do think I have found something better. Yes, I do think many Mormons would do well to understand the things I understand. However, I am aware that most Mormons are somewhere between unwilling and unable to deal with the information I have found about Mormonism. And, I am familiar with some Mormons who understand all I do, and more, and choose to continue in their faith. You may well be one of them too. I do not judge them or you personally, except as I must as I decide who to trust and who not; whose advice to follow and whose to ignore etc. while making my way through life. Since I have found it helpful in making up my own mind about these things to hear as many opinions of others as possible about their frank perception of life's experiences, I make my perceptions publicly available on the same basis with the caveat that they only that – one person's frank perceptions.

I do judge as inferior and worthy of my public reproach any system that is materially relevant to me and that is slanted toward information suppression, deception and authoritarianism while trumpeting the importance of truth and agency more loudly than anything else. Human progress is made as people, one at a time, express their views about things like this by either verbalizing them or voting with their feet. I believe Mormonism is a system of the type just noted, and act in a manner consistent with that belief. I have heard nothing from you or any of the many intelligent, well-read faithful with whom I have met or corresponded that comes close to changing this view. You and I disagree on this point and there is no need to debate it further. We have already heard each other fully.

It is my view that you represent a system that as far as I can tell, is dedicated to presenting what is at best a deceptive view of its origins, authority and current reality. The missionary discussions my son gave make me ill in this regard. The ones I gave were worse, as where the lessons I taught in innumerable church meetings over the years concerning Mormon origins. By causing innocents like my son and me to so act, the Church furthers its own interests and often harms its members. I do not expect you to agree with me. However, many other well-read, intelligent people do. And a surprising number of them from all over the world have thanked me in over-generous terms for helping them to understand their experience - why they have felt so broken - and for helping them to take steps to control their own lives and live in what for them seems to be a more healthy manner. Do you deprecate their experience? Are they simply misguided? If you accept their experience and perceptions as legitimate, which you have suggested that you do, how to you deal with the role my incoherent ramblings

seem to have played in that regard?

Let me suggest that these people are simply a few among the multitude who have lived the same drama since the beginning of time. Here is my view of that drama: A small group of people has the opportunity for some reason to control a large group. The small group uses whatever means it can find to establish and perpetuate their control. The test here is not truth. It is what will work to control the large group, which means that a degree of believability sufficient to assemble a group of believers is required. And that is all.

As the times change, the available and effective means of control change, and so the story told to justify the use of those means must change. The less the larger group remembers of the old and now conflicting story, the better. So as much of it is suppressed as possible, which speeds its erasure from the consciousness of the larger group. If the large group can be completely isolated from other social influences and the information that cause to circulate for a period of time, so much the better. This helps social concrete to set.

A few of the larger group question the premises for their submission to the smaller group, and if they can, break free. This is a painful experience, particularly when family members and close friends react differently to the stimuli that cause the questioning. Those in control of the larger group then engage in whatever damage control then can to keep the rest of the group in line. We know how that went during the various Inquisitions and under modern and ancient dictatorships and fascist regimes. Thank goodness the we live in a democracy where things of that nature do not normally occur. I wonder what it would have been like had BY been successful in establishing the State of Deseret under the rule of the Counsel of Fifty. I see no reason in Mormon history or human psychology and sociology to assume that Deseret would have been materially different than Iran or Iraq under the Mullahs.

Mormonism, in my view, is an insignificant repetition of a story that is at least as old as human history. And part of the irony of it is that each time this pattern is repeated, man's instinct to put himself at the center of all things makes his tiny, repetitive story the epic around which all human history was to be written.

My study of cognitive dissonance and its effect on members of all controlling social ideologies provides the single most cogent explanation of what I see across a world in which all kinds of dogmas that are radically inconsistent with each other (and with mankind's increasingly scientific view of reality) are believed by and used to control well-educated, intelligent people throughout their lives. Look at the Taliban, JW's, young earth creationists, 7th Day Adventists and the Mormons, to name a few. They each display similar behaviours: They each deceive; they each use fear to control; they each harm their members in some ways; the more radical among them are becoming an increasing threat to the rest of society; and they each use to one degree or another the same excuse - "If we were not here, chaos would reign! Leave our protective embrace and all kinds of bad things will happen to you!" The leaders of these groups often justify some of the behaviours just indicated by invoking Plato's philosopher kings – since the

leaders know what is best for the followers, they are really doing them a favour by lying, scaring, manipulating etc. them into doing what is "right". And for the most part, the leaders of each of these groups is as well intentioned as can be imagined. I would say the same thing, incidentally, of Winston Blackmore [leader of a Mormon polygamous group in Canada], with whom I had the chance to spend some time in a professional capacity a while ago. Thomas Kuhn, as you likely know, even said that within the scientific community - that bastion of objectivity - progress occurs "one funeral at a time". One of history's most important lessons is that we consistently underestimate the power of the social forces in our lives to control our perception of reality. I am fully aware of that danger concerning my own present perspective as I write these words.

So, I feel that I was damaged by Mormonism and in particular by its well intended leaders who you epitomize in some ways, and I am reacting to that experience in a fashion that the biologists and others tell us is hard wired into animals for whom small groups are important to survival and propagation. That is, we have a warning instinct. When we feel that we have been damaged or are threaten by something that may do harm to those within our group, we will issue warnings and even go to lengths that are not justified by anything we can hope to personally gain from that activity. If you have not already read it, you would likely find David Sloan Wilson's "Darwin's Cathedral" an interesting read in this and other regards.

I intend to allow the "warning" impulse in me to run its course. However, I spend less time now doing things related to Mormonism than I did a year ago. I will likely say the same thing a year hence. There was a time during which I reached out to the people closest to me in an attempt to help them see what was so obvious to me, and also (as I now see it) to preserve as much of the intimacy in our relationships as I could. I have learned a hard lesson about the effectiveness of mental conditioning as a result of doing this. A small percentage of these people have, to date, been able to even look at information that questions their beliefs, let alone absorb or act on it. This should both please you, and cause you to question the justification of your belief (as you stated it to me) that Mormons generally feel free to consider information from all sources that are relevant to their faith. Mormons are no different in this regard than most people who have been raised within a particular faith tradition. The big difference between my point of view now as compared to when we last corresponded is that I have ingested a huge amount of information about how other religions and cultures work that has helped me to place Mormonism in context.

I seldom interact anymore with Mormons regarding Mormonism unless invited to do so. Such was the case with [joe], for example. He came to me, as people who question have been doing in a steady stream for the past year, ever since I acceded to the request of a few friends to put some of my "therapeutic" (for me) essays up on the Internet. His discussions with his Bishop and many others preceded his call to me. I have been in his company on many occasions, and I had not broached the topic with him and was unaware of his questioning. My conduct is not guided in this regard by a feeling that religious beliefs should not be questioned as a matter of principle. I believe the opposite to be the case (see Sam Harris, "The End of Faith" for someone who also espouses this view). However, it is in my view a waste of precious time and "friendship

capital" (if I can call it that) to give people information with which they do not wish to deal.

I am not a "guru" of the type you described. I don't have followers; I don't tell people what to do; I don't profit in any way from what I do regarding Mormonism, but rather find that this costs me something significant; I don't direct large capital budgets or build monuments to what or whomever I choose; etc. I am merely one of a practically speaking innumerable group of people whose pluralistic communication with each other is facilitated by the Internet. And ironically this Babel is producing innovation (some might even say "wisdom") more rapidly than at any other time in human history. One of the most interesting dialogues I have going at the moment is with a software developer who lives in Northern Pakistan. He stumbled across my website while looking for sports related things since I have one essay there that deals with an aspect of the psychology of athletics. He is a Sufi and is teaching me about meditation and other things as I help him to understand aspects (from my limited point of view) of the Western approach to spirituality. My interest in meditation is fuelled by things like <http://www.urbandharma.org/udharma8/monksmed.html> See the link at the end of that page for the full paper.

I tell each person with whom I interact that in my view we should each seek to hear as many voices and see the broadest perspective possible while collecting the most reliable information we can, and then decide what we value and do what seems most likely to bring what we value into being. If an institutional religion is helpful in this process, great. If not, that is fine too. As time passes and more people adopt attitudes similar to the one I have just articulated (as The World Value Survey indicates is occurring - see <http://wvs.isr.umich.edu/>), the institutions that facilitate this individuation process will ascend and those who fight it will descend. This is a train that is as easy to see coming down the track as the blacks getting the priesthood, the acceptance of sexual orientation as a matter largely of biology and hence largely not of sin, the more or less equal participation of males and females in governance structures, and the Book of Mormon joining the Book of Abraham in the realm of metaphor. I expect that the latter three issues will take a long time for Mormonism to digest, but digest them it very likely will. Those issues no more difficult than polygamy and the blacks were in the late 1800s – in fact I would say that they will be easier for Mormonism to deal with.

I can imagine some cases where Mormon belief (at the metaphoric end of things at least) and practise could play a useful role in the individuation process. There are many more cases in which, in my view, Mormonism does little more than get in the way of human development, and by so doing causes serious damage of the type I experienced, or worse. There is a world of difference between the pluralistic, exploratory approach I just outlined and the kind of monism Mormonism posits. That is, in my view, its primary weakness as a worldview - its monism.

I do not think I will destroy the Mormon Church. It is far too large for that. Those who study these things make it clear that most people who are born within and thoroughly conditioned by a particular faith tradition - including some faiths that seem certifiably looney - will die within their faith. However, a minority will leave. That is how it goes with

virtually all faiths. Mormonism works the same as most do in this regard. And the Internet will likely increase the size of the minority that leave or seriously scale down their participation. This issue is burning for the leaders of many faiths, and given what Mormon leaders say about the Internet, it is highly probable that they share this concern.

So, all I hope to do is help anyone who happens to run across my website and those who choose to get in touch with me understand their life experience a little better, and to recognize that they can make choices that they perhaps do not realize they can make. I am a tiny pluralistic force that is resisting the Mormon monist message that there is only one way to do things, and that it requires obedience to Mormon authority. This is, again, my warning instinct in operation. It is nothing more complicated or sinister than that. One can label it "the influence of the adversary" or anything else one wishes. Or as JS once said while in multiple clandestine sexual affairs himself, maybe the fact that anyone displayed the spirit of apostasy is solid evidence that such is an adulterer. I doubt you would agree with him, and can assure you in any event that this is not my case. But that was just another one of his many "human" moments, right? Or maybe he did not say "Thus saith the Lord!" before that one? No, that doesn't work because some of his "Thus saith the Lord" predictions or injunctions will wildly off target too. So, how do we tell when it is wise to believe JS? He lied or was simply wrong many times, and yet spoke with such authority on so many occasions (and particularly when his authority was being questioned as was the case when he levelled the above accusation of adultery) about things so miraculous that only faithful Mormons believe them.

Perhaps the way to answer that question is to rephrase it. Wise for whom?, might be the question. It is in the best interest of the Mormon Church for people to uncritically accept what JS said in every case where he has not yet been proven wrong. And it is in the best interest of each individual to obtain the best purchase they can on reality. So, if purpose of the exercise is not to find the truth in JS statements and so better connect to reality, but to facilitate the control of a large group by a small group, then we should not question JS's credibility. And if our purpose is to understand reality; seek and follow the most reliable advice regarding cause and effect equations etc., we should question him as or more closely than anyone else who asks us for our money and time in exchange for future benefits.

Given how common behaviour of my type of warning behaviour is throughout the human and animal kingdom where past or future harm is perceived, the warning instinct is by far the best explanation I can provide for my behaviour. I think it would be realistic for you and your confreres to expect more of the same from me and others who go through experiences similar to mine.

As I indicated to Jeffrey Holland, the way to deal with the warning instinct of post Mormons is to reduce the gap between reality (as likely to be perceived on the basis of the historical record) and the myths taught by Mormonism. That is, stop deceiving people and hence stop hurting them, and you will turn off their warning instincts. I have a strong preference for naturalistic theories that neatly explain human and other behaviour as this one does, particularly when compared to their supernatural

counterparts that do not explain behaviour unless massive amounts of information is suppressed or distorted. Such is the case with the "influence of the adversary" and "adultery" theories above.

And by being one of the heretics who do no more than buzz around the elephant's head as it lumbers along, I will perhaps inadvertently perform part of the "life blood" giving function for Mormonism that Joseph Campbell attributes to heretics. He says that the nature of large institutions is such that they cannot stay in touch with the needs of their members, and that heretics are an important part of the institutional nervous or early warning system. Institutions - without hardly ever being aware that they do so - heed the signals of the heretics and so avoid troubles far larger than those the heretics themselves create. Campbell (perceptively in my view) suggests that any institution that was successful in completely suppressing dissent and heresy would by so doing sign its own eventually death warrant. It would only be a matter of time. Max Webber made similar observations using different terminology.

Your experience with Mormonism has been quite different from mine. Many people, however, experience it as I do. I have corresponded personally now with many hundreds of them. When we last corresponded, you deprecated my experience - it was my fault that Mormonism did not work for me; had I sinned?; it was my fault that I did not look at "questioning material" even though I was acting in obedience to "God's prophets" in doing as I did; etc. I rejected that notion then, and given the many people from whom I have heard during the intervening months who experienced Mormonism precisely as I have, I feel even more justified now than then in the position I have taken.

Given the tenor of this note, you will likely be surprised to find that I am still in contact on a regular basis with people who consider themselves faithful Mormons. Some of them hold leadership positions such as Bishop and High Counsellor. These are people, however, who are trying to open the system up and deal with some of the abuses that concern me. Interestingly, at least some of them rationalize answering the apostate related questions in the temple recommend interview so as to keep their recommends on the same basis that Mormon leaders have in the past justified deception – that is, the end justifies the means. They feel that they need to continue on the inside to affect the changes required to fix a broken system, and so their counselling with and sympathy for a known apostate such as me is OK if it helps them along that path. Or, they redefine the term "apostasy" in a way that would make their leaders blanch. Behaviours of this type were foreseen by Charles Penrose long ago. As Carmon Hardy (Cal Fullerton, former BYU history prof) put it relative to the "lying for the Lord" that occurred while Mormon leaders dealt with polygamy (See <http://www.mormonalliance.org/casereports/volume3/part4/v3p4c21.htm>):

"This pattern so alarmed Charles W. Penrose, a future counsellor in the First Presidency, that in 1887 he told President John Taylor that he feared for Mormonism's future. "The endless subterfuges and prevarications which our present condition impose," he said, " ... threaten to make our rising generation a race of deceivers" (368). There was, then, even among those who employed it, a recognition that deceit, however necessary, carries the danger of becoming precedent for more deceit in an ever-

increasing spiral."

So, Mormon leaders sometimes ask for my advice, as amazing as that may seem, regarding issues that they don't think their file leaders will understand. But most of the "faithful" with whom I correspond are what you would likely call "cultural Mormons" and who I used to regard with some frustration while I was a Mormon leader. They are the type who would not have shown up for many leadership meetings and so ruined the attendance records you used to have as Bishop of the Student Ward in Edmonton. And they would seldom get around to home teaching or other time consuming assignments. They too are trying to change things from within.

As time passes, I feel less inclined to spend my time dealing with Mormon issues of any kind. Issues related to the functioning of our broader culture increasingly attract my attention. Mormonism is like a wind is blowing itself out within me. Many people who have gone down this path before me - including one who was around the founding of Dialogue and with whom I hope to meet next week while I am in Southern California - have told me that is how it went with them. I do not intend to resist the inclination I feel to slip into the night from a Mormon point of view, and into brighter light from my own perspective. I recognize and do not mind the relief that some people like you may feel at one less fly buzzing around - and I see myself as no more significant than that.

As far as our future correspondence is concerned, given my objective (help as many people as are inclined to do so leave or loosen up their ties to Mormonism) and your objective (the opposite, I assume) I don't think we are likely have much to talk about beyond the kind of pleasantries that would not motivate either of us to use scarce time to communicate. I would not deceive you as to my intent, and then use the understanding I glean from our interaction to move toward an objective I know you would not support. However, I am sending this to you with knowledge that some of the things I have said may be of some small use to you in understanding and combating the efforts of people like me.

If you ever wanted to gain insight into what people like me would need to see in Mormonism before being willing to become part of the Mormon community again, I would be happy to share my views. I made the same offer to Jeffrey Holland, but doubt that I will hear from anyone in that regard. And to be clear, I have no interest whatsoever in leading any other kind of religious group. The world, in my view, needs less such groups than it already has.

I respect your intelligence and believe you to be as well intended as any of the religious leaders of other faiths who are also certain that they have the truth. Regrettably, it is that commonality that I have come to regard as the danger of people like them and you.

You proclaim (and I think feel) certainty that you have the truth. You are also part of an authority structure that is without checks and balances of a meaningful sort, and cannot (so far as I am aware) be called legally to account for harm that others suffer when they rely upon your representations of certainty that you have the truth; that you will act in their best interest; and that all who disobey your authority are at the great peril. So, in

my view, you and others like you within Mormonism and elsewhere have significant power as a result of the trust you have engendered in people who are as I was, and yet are not meaningfully accountable for the consequences of your exercise of that power within an extraordinarily broad range of behaviour.

As Michael Ignatieff ("The Lesser Evil" - another book you would likely enjoy) has pointed out, one of history's clearest lessons is that strong emotions have proven to be self justifying. Long before him, Henry Adams said something similar: "The historian must not try to know what is truth, if he values his honesty; for if he cares for his truths, he is certain to falsify his facts." And the mistakes made under a misapprehension that one has "the truth" do not stop at the misrepresentation of facts. They run toward burning books, sending men into war, torturing innocent people, etc. They go as far as the society within which the "truths" are held will let them go. The state of affairs in the Muslim world is instructive in this regard.

Precisely for that reason, checks and balances on power are of particular importance when strong emotions are in the air. And what emotions are stronger than those connected to the loss of personal power, coupled with the admission of a life spent barking up the wrong tree, the pain that the "truth" will cause for innumerable innocents who have depended on your judgement, the possibility that a culture you value for all kinds of reasons (not the least of which is the position of honour and respect you have earned within it) will be destroyed, etc.? These factors, in my view, conspire to make people in your position dangerous despite having the best of intentions. And the smarter and more credible, the more dangerous they are in my view.

For the reasons just stated, the checks and balances of democracy are possibly the greatest of mankind's inventions. Why should we think that the leaders and followers within Mormonism or any other kind of "ism" will behave differently than other humans? This myth - that "our" leaders are not like all the rest because of God's inspiration or some other supernatural power - is near the foundation of most non-democratic power structures. In that regard, you would likely enjoy another great book I am reading at the moment - Robert Paxton's "The Anatomy of Fascism".

So, I can say a number of conflicting things about you, including that I respect you in many ways; would likely enjoy chatting with you about a wide range of things - just as I do with * while we golf once each summer; that I trust your professional judgement as I do *'s (I sent him a client a while ago and would not hesitate to do same to you if the right kind of thing came up); and that I deeply distrust and am at odds with you when it comes to anything related to religion because of the powerful and unaccountable position you occupy and the manner in which you have chosen to use your influence to support what is my view is a deceptive organization. Think what would happen if we applied the disclosure rules applicable to penny mining stocks - or even used cars - to Mormonism? I am waiting for a big enough disaster to emerge from the religious world to persuade North American legislators that something akin to the old Blue Sky laws are necessary in the religious world for the same reason they were initially introduced to rein in stock promoters, many if not most of whom were also well intentioned. Ignatieff's wise words apply as well to them, as to political leaders (his intended target), as to

religious leaders.

The intent of those who are the actual deceivers is irrelevant in my view. They should be both educated to the extent possible, and stopped as soon as possible, just as my LDS lawyer friend in * wishes that he had been stopped much earlier than he was while duped into selling non-existent "bank guaranteed international bond" contracts by a con artist from the US. Both he and those who he innocently suckered dearly wish that someone had come along to explain to them how these things worked before they lost their money. My friend's innocence and good intentions only make him look more foolish now. And ironically, those are the very qualities (along with his law degree and respect in the * business community) that made him a highly effective sales person as long as the scam was working.

Just as Paul Dunn stories affected me differently after I found out that he had made them up instead of lived them, so do Joseph Smith's. I am not as certain that Smith made his up as I am in Dunn's case, but the probability is high enough that I will not believe Smith on any point that does not have credible third party confirmation. And I think it is immoral to persuade people to give so much of their lives to Mormonism in exchange largely for blessings Smith promised will arrive after death, while on the one hand withholding the information necessary to enable them to make an informed decision about Smith's credibility, and on the other testifying that he is certain to be reliable on the most important historical points on which Mormonism's authority is based. Whether Smith was a liar or simply deluded himself does not matter for this purpose. He is the analogue in either case to the US based con man who stung my friends in *. And there is a long chain of people between Smith and the innocents who today do his bidding, and a much more complex system of social benefits and dependencies are involved. There, the fraud analogy breaks down. But, those in Smith's chain in my view have varying degrees of culpability that depend upon their understanding of how this game is played. You are in that chain.

I believe that you unwittingly harm many innocents just as my well intentioned leaders (for whom I still have warm feelings in many ways) harmed me, and just as I harmed others while I was a Mormon leader and father. I do not judge you for this. I accept your bona fides, just as I do Winston Blackmore's and so do not judge him. In fact, his theological position is stronger than yours, but practical realities count far more than theology in the success of religious institutions. There is a lesson respecting which history speaks with a near unified voice.

My mind was bifurcated while Mormon. I think yours still is. And just as I don't think I could have processed the information I did a couple of years ago had I remained on the Mormon leadership treadmill (I had several clear chances to ingest questioning information while I served as Bishop and the information bounced off me like bird seed), I don't think you have a chance to do so in your current situation. I see no difference between you and the eminent, intelligent people who are orthodox Jews, JW's, young earth creationists etc.

It has been a long time since I heard a new argument in support of Mormonism. At

some point - just as would be your case with the young earth creationists I suspect - we say, "All I am hearing is repetition. I understand the pro and con as well as reasonably possible respecting these matters, and I am confident in my reasoning and assessment of the evidence. I also understand why others likely hold a differing opinion, since virtually all who hold that opinion have a vested interest in belief and almost all who disagree with them are not interested in the matter in the same way. It is time to move on to other things."

I am past that point re Mormonism, while remaining open to the possibility that down the road a new approach may develop that will cause me to change my mind. It is also possible that I will become convinced that the earth is flat after all. I do not intend to hold my breath or delay any significant decisions in the meantime in either case.

And I recognize that much of what I have said above could be (and probably will be) turned about by you and applied to me. That is just how these matters of religious faith go.

So, I am not sure that you would want a friend like me. I am more than capable of being civil to you whenever we happen to bump into each other, which I don't expect to happen often. I even expect that if we happened to be in a golf foursome that we would enjoy each other's company by making chit chat in the polite way people do while business golfing. You are well read and would likely be excellent company in that regard. But the only reason we would have to communicate beyond that kind of thing is to share what is genuinely meaningful to both of us. That is how I use the far too scarce time I have available to stay in touch with people who are outside my family circle. Given my attitudes, as stated above, if you find anything that you think we could profitably share in that way, I will be more than happy to reply. And I will bear the same thing in mind as I continue to explore life's wonders.

Perhaps I could be a kind of loyal opposition for you. Once you have my attention and agreement to look into something that is relevant to both of us, you can count on the most thorough and honest opinion of which I am capable. That will include giving credit where I think it is due. There is a lot of good within Mormonism, just nowhere near enough to balance the bad in my view. But you cannot count on me to politely agree with things I feel are ill advised, or even worse, deceptive. Nor can you count on me to politely remain silent while things of that nature are foisted on others who lack the perspective to understand what is being done to them.

Life is much more multifaceted than I had imagined. And now that I can see more of its irony, complexity and beauty, I love and embrace it as never before.

All the best,

bob

My Friend's Response

On receipt of the above email, my friend gave me a substantial, thoughtful reply. He did

not question his own faith, but was frank respecting some of its difficult parts, and then bore me his testimony without calling me to repentance. This is progress from my point of view. He also acknowledged in a calm, accepting manner that I had accurately assessed what the future holds for us. What follows is my response. This has also been edited to preserve anonymity and to clean up some rough parts I found on re-reading it. Lots of other rough parts are left as they stand.

My Second Letter

Dear *:

I think I understand at least part of your experience because I have lived it, including the feeling of isolation of which you spoke. As you know, you and I have a lot in common in how we approach at least some issues. My former and your actual parenting styles (authoritarian) also seem to have a fair bit in common. Regrettably, that is not a compliment as far as I am concerned for either you or me. And only a few years ago on several occasions, I said things in defence of Mormonism almost identical to what you just did in your note to me.

I do not expect you to change. I did not expect to change myself. I am not trying to get you to change. But I will ramble a little nonetheless since this perspective may be useful for you.

I am perfectly happy to allow you to go in peace, and sincerely wish you personally the best in the path you walk. And because of the responsibilities you have accepted regarding the Mormon Church and the position I have taken relative to it, we may bump into each other on opposite sides of that issue from time to time. I intend to do that without rancour for you personally, but with the feelings and perspective regarding the institution you choose to represent that I indicated yesterday.

You are far enough down the Mormon path that change is far more improbable for you (or anyone in a similar position within any faith) than it was for me. Had I not chosen to get off the Mormon leadership treadmill when I did (we left Vancouver in large measure because I did not want to go from Bishop to member of Stake Presidency, as I had been told was likely to occur), my case may well have become yours in terms of change probability.

Think about that one for a moment. I uprooted my family largely because I did not think I could say no to a Mormon leadership calling that I had been told by those who would know was likely to be extended to me. I felt I had to get out of Dodge while I could. I served a full term as Bishop - served diligently and as well as I could - and told my SP (for whom I still have great regard) that unless he told me as my priesthood leader that God commanded me to stay in Vancouver, that I was leaving. He had already done that once, after hearing from me that I felt for a variety of reasons that my wife and I should move to Calgary. That was the only reason I stayed in Vancouver long enough to be Bishop. He told me it was God's specific will that I stay. But he was not prepared to do it

twice.

My case is a rare one, according to those who study these issues. I have had to simply acknowledge that for whatever reason - blessing or curse as it is variously seen - I reacted to the religious culture that fully conditioned me differently than the vast majority of people who have a similar experience do. This made me feel that I had to leave the confidence and friendship of many people in order to be true to myself. Pretended belief was the only option I saw, and is one that I now know many Mormons use. I made my post Mormon beliefs known and acted consistently with them while feeling the same kind of sacrifice for principle you noted, and then was pleasantly surprised by the wonderful culture into which I entered courtesy of the Internet.

I am now in regular correspondence with scholars, scientists and interesting people who live all over the world. Most of them are post Mormons. But more and more they are just people from a variety of backgrounds who see life in a pluralistic way and lump Mormonism in with all of the other monists of various stripes who think they have a monopoly on truth of one kind or another.

The people with whom I interact tend to be well educated, but their defining characteristic is that they continue to explore their world in a much more rigorous, critical fashion than do most. They challenge accepted beliefs of all kinds - and so themselves - more than the "faithful" do. As I noted yesterday, that is the psychological trait Shermer indicates characterizes people who are likely to leave their religion of origin. This makes for an interesting crowd with whom to walk life's path.

These people stimulate me, challenge me and help me to find the information in which I am interested, whatever it may be. I no longer fear to ask questions of any kind that may help me to grasp reality. I can't tell you how good this feels - to no longer need to reach a particular conclusion. It feels like a clamp has been taken off my head.

While my case is typical of only a small percentage of the experience set that represents Mormonism, the whole Mormon set is large enough that a robust, interesting community of similar types has been created by the tiny subset that resembles me. These folk did not fit Mormonism, tend to question premises in general more than most people, and so it is not surprising that they were inclined to question Mormonism's premises. That, really, is how the certain perception of truth is usually created - by persuading a group not to question the premises on which the alleged truth is based. And that is what "faithful history" helps to do insofar as Mormonism is concerned. But I digress.

I spent some time in England this summer with a young post doc who teaches at a well known university there. I will meet (I think) next week in the LA area with a former university professor who was at Stanford when Gene England et al started Dialogue, as well as a fellow who is a successful attorney. I am exchanging views respecting some aspects of genetics and microbiology with a fellow who is finishing his PhD in NY (with whom I have corresponded for about two years and met in person last Spring at a retreat in Vermont) and a PhD scientist my age who works with the US Army at or near

the Pentagon. Some of my most interesting exchanges have been with several people in Scandinavia, a couple from Australia, and one each from Japan, Korea and the Ukraine. The vast majority, however, are from the US. And most of those not surprisingly are in Utah.

I could keep going, but you get the idea. This community suits me and my interests very well, as ironically, it would yours. That is largely why - despite the difficult adjustment I have made - I feel so good about life in general. Without the Internet this community (and innumerable others like it) could not be created or maintained.

At some point as a person goes down a particular ideological path, the cost benefit equation related to change of the type I made stops working, and our subconscious takes care of that decision for us in most cases. The factors that influence the cost benefit equation and our subconscious reaction to it relate to things like personality type (See Shermer "How We Believe"), the level of commitment the individual has manifested in public (hence, the more leadership positions one has held and the more recent those positions, the less likely change is to occur - see <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.the%20mormon%20use%20of%20belief%20shaping%20technique.pdf>), the nature of the family and social environment in terms of the cost that would likely be imposed by change, etc. This is, as you put it, a working theory. I have read as widely as I can on this topic and cannot find a better one. It explains, in particular, how so many people use precisely the theory you articulated - "I have had certain experiences that are so powerful that they cannot be denied" to justify the continued embrace of highly improbable dogma. While you could not acknowledge the improbability of Mormon dogma, you see the probabilities clearly regarding all the rest. And, interesting, all the rest have the same assessment regarding Mormonism. Here is another predominant pattern.

The best single source material I have found to explain the powerful nature of our personal, religious experiences is Andrew Newberg's "Why God Won't Go Away". You can find a half hour streaming video presentation by Newberg (and a lot of other interesting things) at www.meaningoflife.tv I think his research is great and the conclusions he draws from it are loopy. But he is a credible scientist, and lets us know when he passes from plausible inference to speculation. I leave him at the point of speculation.

You may not experience dissonance, but your behaviour (as was mine for a long time) is neatly explained along with the behaviour of many other groups who are well educated, highly intelligent, and irrationally (from the point of view of the vast majority of outsiders) dogma bound, monist, literalists. The young earth creationists are a particularly fascinating case. If you want to increase your ability to experience your own cog dis, you might study that community and then try to explain to yourself why the means you use to explain how people as well educated as some of them are could hold the positions they do are not also explanatory of people like you and another of my friends who you likely don't know whom I will call [phil]. He is also a priesthood leader and someone whose intellect I deeply respect.

I have not raised these issues with phil, and neither has he with me, likely as a result of the probable stress it would produce on a long friendship without likely benefit to either party. [jill] who you may know, is nearly as bright as phil and much more voluble, and has "gotten into it" with me. The exchange produced a lot of heat and little light. Thankfully, we have remained friends but have little to do with each other - kind of like what I indicated to you would be possible in our case.

[bill] who I think you might remember from *, is another bright one. He and I have also had long discussions respecting these matters. Less heat and much more light was generated on both sides. I confided in him when I ran out of satisfactory answers while trying to save my testimony because I have always regarded him as a Church history scholar. He had not ploughed the ground I was in, is inclined to explore but not debate, and does not indicate his own position with respect to anything. He also does not hold a position of authority within the Church. And, he is the only one of my group of former close LDS friends with whom I continue to share from time to time matters that vitally interest me - matters (Mormon or not) respecting which I feel that I am ploughing new ground. That is an interesting pattern that did not occur to me until I typed it.

As I said at the end of my much too long missive yesterday, I now see that life has far more layers and facets than I could have dreamed possible even three years ago. And I have the clear sense that I am still only scratching the surface.

Again, I wish you peace and joy in your journey.

All the best,

bob