

Chaos and Forging the Self

The Nature and Function of the “Recovery from Mormonism” Bulletin Board

bob mccue
February 6, 2006

What follows is a lightly edited post I made at http://www.exmormon.org/boards/w-agera/w-agera.php3?site=exmobb&bn=exmobb_recovery around August 21, 2004. I dug this out of my archives after having forwarded to me recently the kind of complaint I regularly hear about that board from active Mormons. That is, the RFM board is perceived by Mormons as great evidence for the folly of anti-Mormonism. It allegedly shows anti-Mormons' true colours: ignorant, angry, bigoted, sacrilegious, etc. My experience and views are quite different. As usual, perspective makes a huge difference in perception.

Best,

bob

I just looked quickly for the long thread at the end of which (when I saw it a few days ago) at the end of which the message “I am never going to post here again ...” was posted. I could not find it. The thread had to do with an elegant hoax that a clever guy here pulled on the faithful Mormon community by inventing, and posting in several places on the Internet, a story about Book-of-Mormon like artefacts being found somewhere near Palmyra. He then enjoyed the spectacle of the faithful swallowing the news without a sceptical blink, and proclaiming victory. This reminded me a little of the trick Alan Sokal played on the academic community a while ago (see <http://www.physics.nyu.edu/faculty/sokal/weinberg.html>) in which he managed to have a completely bogus article published in a prestigious academic journal. The article made no sense. That was Sokal's point - the language and concepts used to communicate within the postmodern, humanities branch of academia had reached the point at which they often make no sense, and having managed to slip complete nonsense past the editors of a respected journal in one of the areas where this issue was of greatest concern, he got a lot of people's attention. Both pro and con.

A debate raged for years over the ethics of what Sokal did - he abused the trust of others, damaged the reputation of academic institutions in general, etc. The same debate could be held regarding the joke that prompted censure from some here, but I don't intend to start or participate in it.

And in any event, what Sokal did was damn funny to most but those on the butt end of his joke, as is usually the case with effective jokes. Again, the same might

be said of the post mormon joke above. And in both cases a useful point was made by inciting credulous behavior in communities many members of which take great pride in their rational abilities. But at least one person here did not think it was funny, and has decided not to play with us anymore as a result. I would like to address the merits of that behavior - that someone would not participate here as a result of taking hard exception to something others here did. The reason I do this is not to poke fun or to call to repentance, but to recall that my initial response upon visiting here about two years ago was that I would never have anything to do with this place. I want to think out loud a little about the curious situation in which I now find myself - having started with the attitude just described and now having spent a lot of time reading and writing here and in a couple of similar places. So, here is a little history and related commentary that some may find useful as they consider the inner workings of their own souls (or biology - pick the metaphor your prefer). I am here largely to rewire my own head, and presume that some are here for similar purposes. The first step in the rewiring project is to figure out where the old wiring is and how it works.

I came here first two years ago while still faithful, but teetering, and was repulsed. Such profanity; such disrespect for things held sacred by others; such explicit sexual references! So much anger and negativity! And the chaos! This place was out of control. I lasted about five minutes and left feeling sick. At about the same time I found a place called New Order Mormons, and the nature of play there suited me better as I was then. Some conflict, bad language etc., but much less than here. So I spent quite a bit of time there while figuring things out, and starting to recover.

Perhaps six months later, someone posted a link at NOM regarding something here, and I came over to look at it. It might have been Steve and Mary Ann's *magnum opus* regarding their interviews with Oaks et al, but I can't recall for sure. I read what I came here to see, poked around a little more and then happily exited with a similar feeling of revulsion. I did not come back for about a year, until six months ago. And then I became a regular participant.

What caused my attitudes to change? Well, first and foremost my belief system changed significantly during my first 18 months out of the Mormon Church. Second, I was introduced to a sub-group on this board that was not apparent during my first couple of visits. That is, things tend to appear monolithic but usually are not. The Mormon community, and the Mormon Church itself, are no different. But, there is something more basic under my change in view - my perception of what it means to belong to a group - and how I relate to groups - has changed fundamentally, and that was one of the last pieces to fall into place.

Mormons are strongly oriented toward uniformity of behaviour and conformity to group norms. This is bred into us by our former religious leaders, and parents and other community members flowing along with the same cultural current. The objective of this behavioural pattern is to make us easier to control. We, then,

become part of the same current and tend to try to exact conformist behavior from those with whom we associate. Remember frowning when a clean cut, well dressed, good looking 16 year priest would bless the sacrament while wearing a nicely pressed blue shirt and tie, instead of a white shirt and tie? Our conformist proclivity is particularly strong when we perceive ourselves to "be on the same team", and even stronger when the issues in question are matters of "faith", since that pushes all kinds of deeply imbedded, unconscious, buttons in our collective psyche.

I started a thread a while ago here about Richard Nesbitt's book "The Geography of Thought" that describes big picture differences between Asians and Westerners that are based, accordingly to him, in their different orientations in terms of group cooperation and individual initiative, These attitudes affect our use of language, how we relate to each other, what we see when we look at movies or pictures, what is important to us, etc. And, Mormons seem to be more like Asians than most Westerners, likely because of their more-Asian-than-Western approach to the importance of group norms.

Of particular interest is the idea that Asians are more chameleon-like than Westerners. That is, Asians tend not to perceive themselves as unitary in personality terms. I am not "bob", I am "bob with his boss", "bob with his subordinates", "bob with his family", "bob with his friends", etc. I have multiple personalities. I literally take on the nature of my environment. My group, and my role in it, define me to a large degree. I took a battery of personality tests while on my way out of Mormonism that confirmed this to be the case with me. But that did not trouble me. I had been aware of this tendency for years, and thought it healthy. I thought it meant I was "flexible", and in a way I suppose that it did. I now see this as being connected to the breaking down of personal boundaries that is the topic of a recent thread I started respecting the Mormon confession of sin process. For a Westerner, the kind of impairment of personal boundaries that results from being a faithful Mormon is often a pathology.

Asians simply accept that their personalities are not unitary. And before I go further, I realize that I am making gross generalizations about "Asians" when there are many distinct Asian cultures. I worked for years with people from Hongkong, Taiwan, China, Japan and Korea, and know something the other countries that comprise Asia as a result. I am merely parroting Nesbitt here.

In any event, the taboo in many Asian cultures is sticking out; resisting the group influence; creating disharmony. Asians have more trouble than westerners in making distinctions between "right and wrong" in rational terms when, for example, what is rationally "wrong" will also create harmony, which makes it seem "right" to many Asians. That is, harmony is an important end and a variety of means that would not be acceptable to most westerners are subconsciously justified by many Asians in order to reach that end.

I think it is fair to characterize Mormons as a curious combination of Eastern and Western attitudes as a result of growing up surrounded by, but not being fully part of, Western culture ("being in the world but not of the world"). Mormonism is a cultural island that is much more strongly authoritarian and conformist than is its host culture in North America. As a result, I think it fair to suggest that many Mormons may feel some tension between their Western individualistic (we choose what we want to be!) and Asian group oriented or chameleon tendencies (but we know from experience that we take on the color of the group with which we associate), and hence resist being part of groups that might infect them with traits they do not wish to acquire. And whether this is the causal factor or not, Mormons tend to want to find groups where the "sameness" and attitudes regarding conformity, as well as the behavioural standards in general, are such that they can feel comfortable. For faithful Mormons, this means hanging with Mormons almost exclusively, which satisfies an important objective from the perspective of Mormon leaders. Mormons who associate almost exclusively in groups dominated by Mormons, are less likely to have perspective altering experiences than Mormons who circulate freely in non-Mormon dominated social settings. When a Mormon "leaves the fold", however, these ingrained habits of thinking in conformist terms are not automatically shed, and cause some interesting things to happen.

Post-Mormons tend to dislike authority (particularly Mormon authority), but many (at least initially) don't like complex, messy, relatively chaotic, individualistic group behavior. How do you avoid such behavior in groups? In my experience, only by having a strong authority figure. Hmmm. Even at RFM we have relatively strong authority figures - just try to discuss politics or express a serious belief in God or Jesus. Hmmm. In my view, this is justified here at least in part because of the specific purpose for which this place was created and maintained, and in any event, the level of collective civility required to get along without such authority is absent.

Until the post-Mormon individual overcomes the need for relatively uniform group behavior, life is likely to continue to be pretty hard to deal with in my view. And I note that the future in the West will be hard on these folk (whether Mormon or not), since the clear trend is toward increasing amounts of individualistic behavior throughout society (see articles and charts found at <http://wvs.isr.umich.edu/fig.shtml>). We may as well start to get used to this. And having travelled that road recently, I recommend the experience even though I felt initially like Mary Poppins in a strip club/whore house - completely disoriented and not wanting to even look around, let alone get to know the people by whom I was surrounded.

Experiences of this nature are painful, but ultimately satisfying in hard to imagine ways for those who have not had the experience before. Kind of like learning to drink wine and coffee, or to eat curry and bitter olives for that matter. Those accustomed to a narrow range of tastes (mostly bland or sweet) have trouble

with things that are outside that range. However, once having paid the price to "develop" an appreciation for the broader range, everything in between tastes more interesting. I now find a good meal that starts with a fine wine and ends with coffee (and maybe even a bitter chocolate or tangy desert if I have calories to spare or just don't give a damn that night) to be much enjoyable than any kind of meal I have previously known. Contrary to the beliefs of those who have sipped wine a time or two and hated it (as is the case with many Mormons), the countless people who have enjoyed it throughout the ages are not all addicts needing their fix. But, as is often the case, it takes and some effort to learn to enjoy the more complex and powerful of life's experiences - those that require a broad perspective to appreciate. My experience with wine and coffee is only one of the many perspective expanding experiences to which leaving Mormonism has treated me. I could say similar things about movies; art; literature; music; etc.

One more analogy comes to mind that I will share before leaving this horse that some may already regard as long dead. Think of what happens when we start to play a new sport, or fast moving game of some kind. I can recall this happening to me as I learned to play basketball and volleyball as a young person. But the most recent experience that comes to mind has to do with my kids and their video games. When I try to play them, I simply freeze up. Way too much information is coming at me. And I crash, get eaten - whatever - as my kids waltz through the maze until their laughter at my ineptitude stops them. IF I were prepared to invest the time required (which I am not), I am certain that things would slow down, start to make sense, and I could play just fine. I have been through the same thing a thousand times. Seeming chaos becomes order if we allow ourselves the chance to acclimatize.

In any event, in large measure as a result of experiences that have expanded my perspective while seeming to immerse me in chaos, my attitude toward membership in almost all large groups has become less Asian and more Western. And, incidentally, I am less chameleon now than I have ever been, I can describe a "bob" now with more clarity than before. This is, I believe, the result of one of those paradoxes of which I wrote above. My immersion in relative chaos caused my multiple personalities to merge. Was this some kind of baptism? The rebirth metaphor seems appropriate at least. A definable, and much more likable from my point of view, "self" was somehow forged by my ongoing experience with relative chaos of the kind I experience here.

It is my view that this is a direct result of my finally establishing personal boundaries; of forming clear ideas as to what is my choice, and dramatically reducing the list of personal attributes and choices that I will allow authority figures to determine for me. This is why I no longer take on the color of my group *du jour* so readily.

And so, I have come into being for the first time in many real senses. This is perhaps not so much a rebirth, as a birth. And again, I don't think I could have

done that without allowing myself to be painfully placed, at least initially, in environments where the hurly burly of reality would be brought to bear on me, and I would become accustomed to choosing my own path, and get comfortable on that path in the presence of many others who make different choices. I needed to shed my reliance on the illusion maintained within the Mormon Church that most of us think and believe the same thing. Even within Mormonism this is much more apparent than real as a result of the rule that the only thoughts expressed in public must conform to Mormon dogma, and must not question Mormon authority.

So, my attitude toward most groups is now similar to that regarding my membership in the human race. I do not take responsibility for the actions of other members of the group. I may be offended. I may disagree, even violently. But I do not feel inclined either to force my opinions on others, or to decamp. However, I place an even higher premium than before on the opportunity to engage people with differing views in debate, and think that groups that can hold people who espouse different opinions in respectful debate without one feeling the need to depart, are among the most valuable to belong to and important in human terms. In these places, the greatest innovation, and art, are likely to be created. Why? Because at the heart of most great art and creativity is paradox (see "Does Religious Belief Affect Creativity?" at <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.creativity.pdf>), and usually not the resolution of paradox.

Often the seeds of powerful, moving ideas in either technological or artistic terms are found in the necessity (or at least seeming inevitability) of paradox, and our seeing this in new light. See Hofstaeder's Pulitzer Prize winning book "Godel, Esher Bach" for an extended technical and metaphoric analysis of some aspects of this process. Even the great Einstein likely fell short of understanding the last chapters in physics written during his life because he could not grasp, or even reconcile himself to, the paradox at the heart of Heisenberg's uncertainty principle.

So, there are lots of things at RFM with which I don't agree, and in some cases people post things that I find offensive. Most of them are not important enough to me to merit comment. One does, however.

High on my wish list, for what it is worth (and in light of what I have just said, that is not much), is that people here were more civil in general. The greater our civility with each other, the wider the range of conflicting views we can hold in the air, and hence the further we will be able to see together and the more personal and collective understanding we are likely to achieve. The greater our collective civility, the less need there is for external controls to stem the tide of unmanageable chaos that would engulf us if we persist in a relatively uncivil state, as is evidenced by most unmonitored internet bulletin boards related to

religion that I have visited. The scientific community, flawed though it is in many ways, has much to teach us about this and related things.

My views expressed above are influenced, no doubt, by the fact that I am essentially a gentle person, although those who have seen my temper may dispute this. I still find rough play disturbing. I avoid conflict unless I perceive it to be necessary, but once cornered become very unpleasant for those who have cornered me. I like debate, but dislike debasing other human beings. I try to adhere to Baruch Spinoza's dictum:

"I have made a ceaseless effort not to ridicule, not to bewail, not to scorn human actions, but to understand them."

And sometimes I become so emotional (Mormonism still exposes my worst weaknesses in this regard) that I do things for which I am later ashamed.

I value the diversity of this community, and revel in the freedom that comes from not feeling responsible for the actions of all those who post here. For this I am grateful. There are, of course, limits to my tolerance. But they are much broader than they have ever been.

I would be interested to hear whether I am the only one who has experienced something like this, and what others think about it.

All the best,

bob