

“I Was Healed of Rheumatism at the Banff Hot Springs!”

On the Nature of Certainty and Testimonies

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

We were in the hot springs-fed, outdoor swimming pool at Banff National Park near Calgary this weekend. In the entrance area, there was a history of the hot springs posted, including a summary of the native and early white settlers' belief in the curative properties of the pools. These included excerpts from advertisements and newspaper articles telling of how people had been cured of gout, rheumatism, Bright's disease and other illnesses as a result of soaking in the hot springs. One man indicated that he had been cured of rheumatism; that after three weeks he could walk after being invalid after many years; and that after five weeks treatment he ran a footrace. A medical doctor established a spa/hospital/hotel near the springs, heavily advertised his many successes and made a lot of money. One of the interesting details about that hospital is that abandoned crutches were almost always visible around the hospital's hot pool, a fact that no doubt suggested to incoming patients what they should expect. The foul tasting water from the springs was bottled and sold for its medicinal properties, which included all of what is indicated above as well as aiding recover from hangovers.

As we soaked there on Sat. night, I asked one of my faithful-Mormon adult children and a friend (one a Mormon returned mission the other not) who were with us if they were aware of the New Testament story about the healing hot springs. They said they did not remember it. So I reminded them of John 5 (I had to look it up later to confirm the cite) which tells the story of a pool of water called "Bethesda" that from time to time was "troubled" by an angel, and whoever entered the water first after the "angel" disturbed it was healed of whatever infirmity they had. This pool, it seems, was similar to the one in which we were soaking – it was hot spring fed. And the people believed that the sporadic bursts of water being released from an underground font into the pool and the effect on the pool's surface this caused were due to the actions of an angel.

The story in John continues by indicating that an invalid man lay by the waters but could not be healed by them because when the water moved, others always made it in before him. Christ, upon hearing this, simply commanded him to "rise, take up thy bed, and walk". And the story indicates that he did – Christ healed him. This happened on the Sabbath, which led to a debate as to whether it was appropriate to heal on the Sabbath since that was a form of work. The main point of the story is not that there are healing hot springs or even that Christ could heal people. Those were accepted facts that were props for the main idea; that certain things that had been prohibited on the Sabbath

could be done under Christ's interpretation of the Law of Moses. This was part of his "compassion overrides rules" program for reforming Judaism.

I asked my child and guest if they had thought about the parallels between the beliefs of the natives and settlers in the Banff area regarding mineral springs, and those of the Jewish people of Jesus' day. They had not, but quickly put two and two together. I asked them if they thought the hot springs near Jerusalem had real healing properties. They said they did not. I asked them if they thought it odd that the Christian writers of the New Testament did not question these healing properties, and in fact used them to show how powerful Jesus was – that he could do what the well-known hot springs could do. They believed that he had the same kind of force of nature as they did. My child and guest had not thought of this. One of them, however, suggested with a smile that it is all a matter of belief. If you think it will work, it probably will. I told him that he got the prize – that he had just expressed one of the constants of human nature as both religious and secular history discloses it.

The Jews believed in the curative properties of their pool likely for the same reason that the natives and early white men in the Banff area believed the Banff hot springs to have supernatural powers – because they displayed characteristics that were rare, and people want to feel that they can overcome illness. Mankind's ability to experience what he wishes to experience took care of the rest. That is one of the constants of human behaviour – we will perceive our experience as we wish it to be as long as we are not drawn up short by evidence and/or emotional experience so clear that we cannot ignore it.

Later that evening, when we were laying in bed almost asleep, it occurred to me that I should have drawn attention expressly to the nature of the testimonies that the people "healed" by Banff's hot springs had borne. Could you have convinced that man who ran his first footrace in years that what he was feeling had nothing to do with the Banff hot springs – that it was psychosomatic? If not, would we regard his certainty as a form of pathology? Would we not think of him as a kind of naïve rube? And, how does the certainty that many religious people (including Mormons) feel about some experiences they have had compare to his certainty? Virtually all Mormons would likely conclude that this man's certainty is simply misguided. But that would not dent his certainty. He would likely say that he experienced something that puts his belief beyond question, and so it does not matter what others think.

On the other hand, Mormons are certain of many things often including that God has healed them and their loved ones on many occasions, not to mention that Joseph Smith often saw God and his messengers and as a result, Mormons have God's exclusive authority on Earth. Most people outside of Mormonism regard this Mormon certainty with the same eye roll and nervous laugh as Mormons do the inhabitants of Banff 100 years ago and their silly beliefs in curative hot springs. The \$64 question is whether Mormons are any more justified in the certainty they feel regarding their beliefs than countless other people throughout human history were with regard to curing mineral waters and a multitude of other things that we now admit are foolish?

Human beliefs about reality can be organized, in rough terms, with regard to reliability. Nothing is 100% certain, but some things are pretty close. What will happen if I drop a ball? Will it fall toward the floor, float up or go sideways? Certain chemical reactions are predictable with a high degree of certainty, and can be repeated at will. This predictability is based on the repeatability of the action in question. Most of our technology is based on principles of physics and chemistry that have been established by repeatable experiment and are used to make reliable machines, computers, etc. Then, we have matters of such complexity or such large scale that while we may understand a lot about them, they are not predictable with anything like the certainty of basic chemical reactions. Their complexity (what will be the state of a particular social group in 100 years, or how does individual consciousness function?) or scale (where will the principles of evolution take human beings coupled with technology?; how will the global warming saga play out over the next 1,000 years?) make them impossible to test with precision. However, we have enough data from which many cause and effect relationships and other things can be inferred with what seems like a high degree of probability with regard to at least some aspects of these things.

And finally, there are some matters that are so complex and untestable that little certainty can be shown to exist with regard to them on the basis of the evidence and theoretical knowledge we now have. Some would say that the interface between human evolution and technology, as well as global warming, fall into this category. Or how about the question of which type of political organization will be more effective during the next several thousand years? Democratic v. autocratic; socialist v. capitalist (or some combination of the two)?; etc. But the classic in this genre may well be, "Does god exist, and if so, what is his/her/its nature?" and "Why does humanity exist?" I cannot think of anything more uncertain than this set of questions and others of similar ilk.

Ironically, it is within this last area of greatest uncertainty that we tend to find people holding the most certain, and contradictory, beliefs. Over the centuries of human experience and from one cultural group to another, the answers given for these questions change radically and contradict each other both from place to place and time to time, while being believed with the same kind of tenacious certainty. This is likely because certainty with regard to these matters is connected to the foundational meanings people attach to their very existence, and their perceived reason for banding together. To question these ideas at the foundation of a social group is to threaten individual human beings with chaos. And almost nothing is more terrifying to the average person than that. Most of us are ill equipped to deal with uncertainty of this type, and so will accept ideas that seem silly to outsiders for an amazingly long time in the face of strongly disconfirming evidence.

Most interestingly, we find that ideologies such as Mormonism follow science and the certainty it can provide unless it conflicts with ideas that form the foundation of society. Over the long term, disputes between ideologies such as Mormonism and science tend to be resolved in favour of science, as illustrated by Galileo. However, change comes

slowly in this regard and ideological leaders try to manage the process so that the faith of as few of their followers as possible is disturbed. Hence, instead of simply acknowledging that religious leaders are wrong, the principle that appears likely to be falsified by science will not be spoken of, and eventually abandoned with as little fanfare as possible. This is how the idea within Mormonism that polygamy was a rock solid, non-negotiable requirement for the Celestial Kingdom was dealt with, for example. I predict that the idea that the Book of Mormon is real history will go the same route, as will Joseph Smith's divinely inspired role in bringing it and other things "inspired" events about.

The point is, of course, that human certainty about manifestly uncertain things should be seen as a huge red flag – a warning that something is going seriously wrong within a social group. It also means that learning about the issue in question has either stopped completely, or will proceed much more slowly than it would were there less certainty respecting it.

So, it is my suggestion that whenever we see certainty around us (or worse yet, feel it in ourselves) with regard to something that cannot be tested so as to justify the certainty people express with regard to it, we should recognize this as a sign of pathology and try to root that certainty out from among us.