

Patriarchal Blessings - A Case Study Respecting Some Of Those Who Would Guide Us

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November 26, 2003**

Introduction

I have been thinking a lot lately about the good and bad aspects of various LDS rituals. Here is how patriarchal blessings come out in that analysis. I will start this by way of relating the experience I had when one my daughters received her patriarchal blessing a couple of years ago, and then break that down a bit. She is, I hope, the last member of our family who will receive a patriarchal blessing.

One Patriarchal Blessing Experience

The daughter in question has not been the easiest member of our family to help to feel spiritual things. That may change, but I doubt that it will. This is not a question of good or bad. This is simply a question of what is. As an eight year old, for example, she refused to pay tithing, and negotiated a compromise with the Bishop who interviewed her that allowed her baptism on that basis. The Bishop told her that she would soon find that she would miss so many blessings by not paying tithing that she eventually would get with the program. She is now 17 and has never paid.

When she and I were talking shortly after she received her blessing, she asked me if I thought that her patriarchal blessing was "real". I asked her how she felt while she was with the Patriarch and he gave her that blessing. She said that she felt really good, and felt some things that she had never felt before. I was with her when she received her blessing, felt many of the same things she did, and could see that this was a special and rare experience for her.

This, in my view, was not due to the special nature of the Patriarch's calling or his spiritual insight, but rather was a function of some remarkable human gifts he has. I have known this man for a long time. He is a good, bright and wise man. I watched as he expended a large amount of emotional energy over the course of half an hour to get close to my daughter. He asked her questions and listened with all of the attention he possessed. He empathized with her deeply and with apparent (and I believe real) sincerity. He connected with her in the same fashion as would a good professional counsellor, but with much more emotion. He is a teacher at a local community college, and was our Stake President before being released and called as Patriarch, but to my knowledge has no training in counselling. I watched as my normally somewhat sceptical, recalcitrant daughter opened up to this man who she did not know, because she could feel a deep, sincere interest and concern on his part for her. Love is not too strong a word to use in this context. I think it would be fair to describe what he did that afternoon, after preparing himself by fasting and prayer, as a "labour of love". After she had opened up and a connection had been established, he concluded that part of the

exercise, and said that he "had a blessing for her". We adjourned to another room in his home, and he placed his hands on her head and pronounced a lengthy blessing. For her, this was anti-climatic. The powerful impressions that she carried away from the experience occurred while they were visiting before the blessing itself.

The blessing contained the usual rote stuff, and is no doubt formulaic to a degree. It also contained some unique stuff, parts of which were in some cases potentially insightful and in others were highly counter-intuitive. It suggested, for example, that this young lady had a work to perform with handicapped children. Knowing her as I do, I do not think this is the case, and the idea was deeply troubling to her. She has many gifts (she will start an NCAA div 1A basketball scholarship next year, and is a good student), but patience with small children and other similar personalities is not one of them. Perhaps the Patriarch was right, but I would put much more trust in some good psychological profiling than in what he had to say. And I told her this.

I reminded my daughter of the story I had told her before about a former member of our Stake Presidency. He carried the "spirit" with him in the LDS sense of that term. I felt it during lengthy personal interviews my wife and I had with him just before we married. At the time of those interviews, he was sexually abusing young boys and was recently convicted of that. It is probable that the good feelings he was able to project helped him to abuse children and teenagers. He came across as the most trustworthy, kind man on earth. Feelings such as those my daughter felt while with the Patriarch are the product of our buttons having been pushed by those who have the talent to push them, not necessarily (or likely ever) "the spirit". In my daughter's case, had she taken those feelings to be evidence that the Patriarch was all he is held out to be, she might have changed the course of her educational program and vocation, in a dramatically negative way.

Analysis

In my view, it is a good thing that we have access to talented people, such as our Stake Patriarch, who are prepared to make the sincere investment of time and emotional energy in my children. I think it was good for my daughter to feel what she did during her time with him. However, as is so often the case with the Church, the good feelings that are produced by healthy human contact within the social superstructure sponsored by the Church, are misused. My daughter was taught to assume that those feelings meant that the Patriarch has special authority to direct her life, and that she should follow his advice. What he innocently and sincerely told her to do, after making the wonderful effort he did to connect with her, could be disastrous for her. What if she spent her educational years preparing to teach mentally ill children, and then found that she did not like that and did not have much ability to do it? Would not the inference naturally be that she was unworthy in some fashion of the blessings she had been promised? Or that she just needed to keep banging her head against that wall until somehow it worked? At best this would be a waste of time and talent. At worst she could succumb to depression.

And most importantly from the Church's point of view, my daughter has been taught to believe that the good feelings the Patriarch created while she was with him are evidence that the Church is "true" and that its leaders must be obeyed. This is how the Church misdirects much of the healthy, normal spiritual and human experiences we have. The Relief Society brought me a casserole, so the Church is true! The Prophet told me to be a good father and husband, and told a cute story about his walnut tree to make the point memorable, so the Church is true! I was all stressed because it seemed that I was the only one of my family or friends who did not have a wonderful testimony, and so when I followed my church leaders' advice and in public bore my "testimony" that "I know the Church is true", even though I did not yet know or even believe that statement, I felt psychic relief, and that means the Church is true! etc. This is how the Church does things.

In my view, this "misdirection" of the run-of-the-mill emotional experiences we all should have performs a good part of the "misrecognition" function to which Pierre Bourdieu refers. As noted by David Swartz:

Bourdieu takes his argument to a more general level by arguing that not only is all action interested [as in motivated by concerns related to advancing the personal or group interests of those who engage in the actions] but that much action can be carried out successfully only if its interested character goes "misrecognized". He argues that a great many practices [the behaviours required by social custom] could not be performed if they were recognized as emanating from the pursuit of self-interest. [Bourdieu wrote:] 'The operation of the gift exchange [a social custom in a primitive group he studied that involved the regular giving of "gifts" that in the aggregate performed within this society the function of the market economy in ours], for example, presupposes individual and collective misrecognition of the reality of the objective reality of the [effect of the gift] exchange. [On the basis of the work of sociologists who calculate the statistical regularities of behaviour, it appears that the action of the gift exchange and other social practises occur on the basis that actors pursue their self-interest, although they will assure the sociologists and each other that self interest has nothing to do with their gift giving, for example, and will provide elaborate reasons for their behaviour that are unrelated to self interest.] It is as if the actors conspire to conceal from their own eyes the self interested character of their actions. (David Swartz, Culture and Power - The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, p. 91)

Much the same could be said of many aspects of Mormon culture. Mormon behaviour only makes sense if the reality of the foundations of Mormonism and the reasons for many behaviours required by Mormonism are misrecognized.

Swartz also says:

Bourdieu understands ideology, or "symbolic violence", as the capacity to impose the means for comprehending and adapting to the social world by representing

economic and political power in disguised, taken-for-granted forms. Symbolic systems exercise symbolic power 'only through the complicity of those who do not want to know that they are subject to it, or even that they themselves exercise it'. In using the term "symbolic violence" Bourdieu stresses how the dominated accept as legitimate their own condition of domination. But symbolic power is a legitimizing power that elicits the consent of both the dominant and the dominated. (David Swartz, Culture and Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, p. 89)

A full apprehension of Mormon foundations causes questioning in most cases of at least the connection of current Mormon leaders to the posited source of authority (god and his communication to Joseph Smith), and in many causes also causes questions respecting the existence of god him/her/itself. And most importantly, it causes a questioning of the reasonableness of the exchange of present time, effort and other resources for a future good (life in the Celestial Kingdom, etc.) the existence of which depends wholly upon the word of one man who has a long history of deceptive, manipulative behavior when trying to elicit the cooperation of his followers, neighbours and peers.

Furthermore, being a member of the Mormon Church provides a variety of goods to different people in addition to the abovementioned "after-life" benefits. The security of the group is important to all, to one extent or another. Some find it useful to be under the direction of strong, authoritative leadership. The more uncertain the world seems, the more comforting this will be to many. For some, the continuity of family and social connections is important. Many have had profoundly moving spiritual experiences, such as the small one my daughter had with the Patriarch as indicated above. These have important probative value as to the "true" nature of the Church, and the possibility of having more such experiences is important in itself to some people. The list of potential "goods" people receive from their Mormon association is lengthy.

Mormons, like many religious peoples, find it much easier to accept performing their religious duties because their beliefs are "true" than because they need something. Hence, the reality of the exchange of their obedience to Mormon authority for the various goods just described is suppressed, or as Bourdieu says, purposefully and subconsciously "misrecognized". This is done because otherwise, something that our human organism intuitively to be of critical importance (the continued connection to a protective, supportive, foundational group) would be threatened. The same mechanisms are likely at work here as when a spouse is unable to recognize signs of philandering or drug abuse that are clear to most objective parties.

And so we have faithful, sincere Mormon Patriarchs such as the one I described above, making real emotional connections with impressionable youngsters like my daughter, and then exercising "symbolic power" over them. This is done by the dominator's (the Patriarch's) use of the very fabric of a sincerely formed emotional connection, to persuade the dominated (my daughter) that she must obey LDS authority and hence strengthen the LDS Church; that is in her best interest to so obey; that she will have

great rewards here and hereafter if she so obeys; etc. The Patriarch was doing something to my daughter that was done to him, and so it seemed legitimate. The powerful feelings he felt confirmed to him that what he was doing was right, and gave him license to tell her how to live. His actions while with her are a profound source of personal satisfaction to him. He could tell that he had connected with my daughter, and was near ecstatic at the conclusion of our meeting. He had, in classic mystic or shamanistic fashion, expended a significant amount of energy and had been rewarded with a profoundly moving experience that had united him to another human being. He wept sincere tears of joy while he delivered her blessing. My wife wept. I felt a little teary, and confused. I was teetering on the edge of disbelief at the time. My daughter, however, did not weep. As noted above, the show for her largely ended at the conclusion of the pre-blessing interview during which the emotional energy was created.

The Patriarch is honoured in our Stake because he consistently delivers the kind of experience my daughter had while with him. He is spoken of reverently as a "good" or "wonderful" patriarch, and is treated with the kind of deference and respect one might expect in such a situation. He has a clear personal interest in creating the kind of experience my daughter had with him. And, I believe him to be a good, sincere man. He is not a villain in any sense of that word. He is motivated by interests that are as pure as conscious motivation can be. I would say the same of most Mormon leaders with whom I have associated. These are good people. And yet, in my view the Patriarch does a profound disservice to those he blesses when the balance of good and bad is toted up. This juxtaposition of good and bad within religious practise fascinates me. Someone once said that the worst evil is built on the most pure religious belief. I am just coming to understand how this works from a psychological and sociological point of view.

How is my daughter interested in what happened when she received her patriarchal blessing? What would motivate her to suppress an objective understanding of what went on, and accept mumbo jumbo like she is of the lineage of Ephraim and should work with handicapped children when she had no inclination in that direction, and recognizes certain character traits in herself that ill suit her for that vocation? If she refuses to play along with the Patriarch and her family is faithful LDS, this will cause trouble for her. It will threaten important relationships. And, she did feel something real while she was with him. And she has been taught that feelings such as that are the best evidence one can have that the "Church is true", etc. Even people like her father, mother and other family members and friends who are well educated and seem (to her) to be as sophisticated as people can be, tell her these things. If she does not play along, she is the one who seems not to "get" it; the irrational one. And does she want to live with her family forever, or not? And if she is not faithful to the Church, she has heard all about how miserable her life will be. There is, in effect, no place of happiness for an unfaithful Mormon. Much of what is negative in life is represented by those weak, sinful, unhappy souls who were once faithful Mormons and are no longer "active". And don't even imagine or talk about being an "apostate" who is cast into outer darkness. That makes one's skin crawl. Indeed, she has a definite interest in finding a way to feel comfortable while playing this game.

Conclusion

In summary, a combination of the absence of information about the reality of other people's lives (non-Mormons and ex-Mormons are at least as happy and functional as Mormons) and the foundations of Mormonism (as noted above), as well as the psychological and sociological factors mentioned above, cause both my daughter and the Patriarch to "misrecognize" the nature of the conditioning process and exchange of goods in which they were engaged that nice Sunday afternoon when she received her patriarchal blessing.

In the end, the ritual of having patriarchal blessing's is one that I am glad to have my family leave behind. However, I am grateful to have learned what I did during the experience described above and others I have had like it, about the importance of "connecting" with other human beings, and how that wonderful experience is there waiting for any of us to reach out for and take. So, as I deal with young people in our family and community (I coach at least one and sometimes several youth sports teams each year), I try to follow the Patriarch's model of expending emotional effort, empathizing, expressing sincere concern for, etc. the kids with whom I deal, and I try to do this on a one on one basis at least a couple of times each season. But having done so, I do not debase the experience by using my newly earned emotional capital to manipulate their behaviour. To do this would be to use "symbolic violence" in a manner closely analogous to what Bourdieu pointed out above. Rather, I encourage them to be all that they can be, and I let them know that I am one of their many fans and supporters.

And finally, I hope for and encourage the involvement of my kids with teachers, coaches, mentors and relatives who will invest the kind of emotional energy our good Patriarch did in my daughter, and will then simply tell her that she is wonderful, the sky is her limit, that she should enjoy discovering what life holds for her, and that they are "there" for her.