

Reality is what it is! What a Relief!

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

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No man will be found in whose mind airy notions do not sometimes tyrannize, and force him to hope or fear beyond the limits of sober probability. Samuel Johnson

Introduction

I should not be writing this now. I am very busy at work and with family issues. However, I have learned over the last while that when the Muses whisper, it pays to listen and they started to whisper this morning. When I heed their call and start to write what they tell me, I almost always am rewarded. When I think, "I am too busy right now, and this signal is so clear that I will be able to pick it up later", I am usually disappointed when I try to recreate the ideas that lifted my spirits. So here I go.

This is all part of the great onion peeling experience that life should entail. We gradually become able to see more, and "When the student is ready, the teacher appears". My departure from Mormonism has accelerated this process.

The Joy of the Present

This morning I met my wife at the hospital regarding a problem one of our kids had. I went over from my office, while she came from home. Before I arrived my wife put our three-year-old grandson into the supervised play area, and I went down to check on him briefly when I got there. This morning when he woke up he insisted that he was a puppy, and so would not wear anything but his puppy Halloween costume. He is in a developmental phase in which he tries on various personae throughout the day – puppy, kitty, raptor, dragon, baby dinosaur, etc. It is hilarious. So there he was in the play area alternating between puppy and little boy, and having a wonderful time with a huge array of new toys and a bunch of other similarly fantasy-minded kids.

Ayden was so completely absorbed by his games that he was oblivious to my presence. As I watched him play, I was filled with joy. And then the Muses started to whisper, aided and abetted by my "watcher" (see <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.an%20agnostic%20in%20a%20foxhole.pdf> for a summary of what he does). I noticed that as I watched my grandson, as in so many other ways, I am now fascinated by what "is" – the unfolding miracle and wonder that is reality – instead focussing on progress toward some state that must be reached. And this simply but fundamentally changes much of my moment by moment experience.

Being What We Are v. Becoming What We Must

Many of my watershed and most joyful events as a Mormon were related to signposts on the road to the Celestial Kingdom – marriage in the temple; goings and comings from missions; baptisms and other covenants made; etc. Signs that loved ones were making progress along this road were big joy producers too – testimonies born; obedience shown; prescribed routines being followed; etc.

While I of course enjoyed just watching one of my children play – or do almost anything else for that matter – I did not (could not?) savour this as I do now. The background to most of my conscious mental activity while Mormon had to do with issues related to what I just indicated – progress toward the goals Mormonism posited for me. And I did not kid myself as to how hard those goals were to achieve. So, my "constant prayer" was that those I loved, and I, would be worthy of the highest blessings God had promised each of us. This required our continual obedience, which meant that I needed to use my influence with my children and wife in particular to cause them to be obedient. And so on those rare occasions when I was with them and had their attention, the question of what I could do to influence them to be more faithful was never far from my mind. I made regular reference to spiritual themes in my communication with them; my testimony was born regularly in direct and indirect ways; indeed, all existence for me was testimony to God's reality and the importance of living life as He directed, and this called out for both my attention and the expression of my testimony.

The mental state I just described meant that there was not a lot of time to just watch a child play and enjoy that moment. The moment could not just be, it needed to be directed toward the purpose of becoming more like God, just as did that child. And my life in particular needed to be directed, because the "natural" part of man was an enemy to God. I was obliged to bridle, harness and break that part of me to be like God. And all those within my influence, whether they knew it or not, were involved in the same struggle. It was my job to bear that burden with them; to help them; to influence them to become more God-like, which meant more obedient to the dictates of Mormon authority as it changed from time to time. Had we lived before polygamy was done away with, I would have been influencing them to "live the Principle" because if we did not do so, the Prophets words were clear – we would not be worthy to live in the Celestial Kingdom after death. The rules are now, of course, quite different in many ways. There are still consistent, however, in that whatever the Mormon leaders say must be obeyed. That is the uniting thread of Mormon theology and social philosophy.

I committed to help and influence in the manner just indicated those around me, and particularly those within my own family, when I was baptized as Mormon. As time passed and I matured, I gradually became more aware of my responsibilities in this regard as a member of, and a priesthood leader in, God's kingdom. Years ago when I read Chaim Potok's classic "The Chosen" about the orthodox Jewish community, I identified with the Tsdik (a Hasidic Jewish community leader who loosely resembles a Mormon Bishop) whose role it was to bear the anguish and psychological burdens of his people. I was serving as Bishop at the time I read the

book. Both roles suffer from dysfunctions that are derived from the same kind of conception of life as a struggle against man's inherently evil nature.

My reaction to situations like my grandson playing are now radically different from what I just described. The moment is to be savoured. It just "is". It does not need to be directed. Particularly, moments of self-discovery like the one I observed should not be directed. Ayden scampered from one thing to another, touching, pushing, pulling, peering under, etc. all the while wearing his puppy costume. His development as a human being is an unfolding miracle. The question is not, "How can I mould him into what he must become", it is, "What a privilege it is for me to watch his nature unfold; to watch him explore this world and decide what he wants and where he fits best. I wonder what he will become? Wow! Look at what he just did!" etc.

Controlling Reality

Most remarkably, I have become aware of how much pressure I used to feel as a Mormon to control reality. Reality tended to go the wrong way. The natural man, and all that influenced him, was God's enemy. Therefore, it was my enemy. It was duty to control it in myself and others to the extent possible. I did this by exercising my influence through thought, word and deed. But mostly, I did this by exercising my faith. And that was a mental process. My situation as it was now reminds of Sisyphus (see <http://www.anselm.edu/homepage/dbanach/sisyphus.htm>), that poor soul condemned by the gods to forever roll a rock up a hill only to have it roll back down, so he could roll it back up again in endless repetition.

The scriptures counsel constant prayer, and during my most faithful years I almost achieved that. In fact, this was one my favorite and best received speaking themes as a Mormon leader – how we could mould ourselves into God's image by constantly referring to His word and those His prophets as our behaviour standards, and the joy that such self moulding and obedience caused me to feel. By constantly asking "What would the Saviour do?" (as interpreted by Mormon leaders, of course) during the course of each day, we could be in constant contact with His divine standard, and could measure ourselves against it and hence Him. When we became sufficiently adept at this, we would receive God's power to control the elements, as indicated by the Book of Mormon (See Helaman, Chapter 10).

And since we could not control the behaviour of others, we should exercise our faith in that regard. This was done through the yearnings and groanings of the spirit as we wrestled with God as Jacob did with the angel, or Enos did all night long. After all, Spencer Kimball and others promised in particular that if parents were faithful, their children might stray but would ultimately be "saved" by their parents' faith if not their own. Was I faithful enough? Had I used all of my influence, and developed my faith to the point where I could control the elements? Obviously not, so more spiritual struggle was required. And I "exercised" my faith by pouring out my heart to God; begging for his help to keep my children on His path, etc. I did this while praying formally at least once a day, but more frequently by having my

mind consider the question "What would He do?" as a more or less constant background refrain.

Relief v. Joy

As a result of the foregoing, the consistent backdrop to my daily experience was one of tension. Moments of clear evidence that those I loved were in the process of becoming what they must become; were successfully walking the Mormon tightrope; where a tremendous relief from this pressure, and hence were perceived as joy. I am reminded of the story a friend recently told me about his surprise at age 35, and after many years of wearing size 10 and a half shoes, at how wonderful a pair of size 12's felt that he happened to try on. He had his feet measured for the first time since he was a teenager, and found that they were size 12 and a half. He had become accustomed to a constant dull ache in his feet as a result of curled under toes and too-tight shoes. Relief from that ache was wonderful, but it is not joy of anything like the type that is now a regular state for me as I simply accept reality for the miracle it is, and watch it take the course it will. That joy is what I experience now as I watch my grandson play; see the mountains each day as I drive to and from work; touch or think of my wife and the wonderful life we have together; and do a host of other more or less significant things. The wonder of reality fills me; lifts me; inspires me.

I do not suggest that culture, teaching etc. have no influence. I am attracted to the ideas of Steven Pinker (The Blank Slate; How the Mind Works; etc.) and others who say that our major personality characteristics are about 50% genetically determined and 50% the result of culture and how we interact with it. So I still try to influence those around me, but my influence is now in the direction of encouraging learning, exploration, critical thinking and personal agency. The really fun part is now watching others discover themselves. All I can do is show them where the Muses sometimes whisper so that I can hear them, and then watch as they begin to search and find different Muses altogether in places I could not have imagined. No one can discover another's soul. The best we can do is act as mid-wives.

I also believe that there is a substantial mind-body connection, though not nearly as great as that many of the mystics among us allege. The recent entertaining movie "What the Bleep Do We Know?" goes over the edge in this regard as far as I am concerned. However, I am interested in learning more about how positive thoughts, faith, etc. can influence the physical state of my body, etc. Whatever this is, it is.

The key for me has become learning as much about reality as I can, and then seeking harmony with it. Until I am shown convincing evidence to the contrary, I will believe that there is a god or other being however named who can overrule the laws of cause and effect that demonstrate themselves to us all day every day, and that in particular, I believe that no matter how I petition any god or develop myself, I cannot overrule those laws. To attempt to do so is to choose a Sisyphean life. To be required to do so by a belief system such as Mormonism to be enslaved.

I am reminded of something Freeman Dyson, the great physicist, said that is relevant to this topic. You can find some of his remarks in streaming video at www.meaningoflife.tv. He was asked if he felt empty when he gave up his faith in God. And I presume as a result of other things he said that he had in mind the kind of personal god before whom I was raised to bow. He said he did not, but rather felt free. He said that as long as he believed in that kind of God, he regularly ran into mental barriers that impeded his progress. But he did not know that was happening.

I would add that in my case (as I assume was the case for him) there was a vague kind of uncomfortable feeling that can only be understood with the benefit of hindsight because until one has experienced something different, there is no context for understanding. I again recall the too-small shoes I described above. Again, context controls perception and understanding in this and so many other cases. I can't over emphasize the importance expanding my context and hence my perspective has played in the transformation that occurred in my life as I left Mormonism.

So, when Dyson finally made the frightening leap and let go of his religious beliefs, he found himself in a wonderful new world where he no longer feared to ask questions. Reality would be what it was. It did not have to be what God or any of His self appointed agents said it was. And so he did not have to shy away from any question that might help him discover some aspect of reality. No such question could be "bad". As a result, he felt a wonderful sense of freedom.

My experience was much the same, and I am trying to convey that excitement to my children and wife. I am only successful, of course, in small measure. I both experience relief because the constant background pressure described above, but I am regularly surprised by the kind of pure joy I felt this morning.

Let It Be

And of course, now that I have made my immense discovery, I find that it is a commonplace for most of humanity. I am just a few centuries (or millennia) late to the game. Even the Beatles had this down.

When I find myself in times of trouble, Mother Mary comes to me, Speaking words of wisdom, let it be.

And in my hour of darkness, She is standing right in front of me, Speaking words of wisdom, let it be. Let it be, let it be. Whisper words of wisdom, let it be.

And when the broken hearted people, Living in the world agree, There will be an answer, let it be.

For though they may be parted there is, Still a chance that they will see, There will be an answer, let it be. Let it be, let it be. Yeah There will be an answer, let it be.

And when the night is cloudy, There is still a light that shines on me, Shine on until tomorrow, let it be.

I wake up to the sound of music, Mother Mary comes to me, Speaking words of wisdom, let it be. Let it be, let it be. There will be an answer, let it be. Let it be, let it be,

Whisper words of wisdom, let it be (John Lennon and Paul McCartney)

Conclusion

I note the tremendous irony that none of the stifling experience I described is required by the most basic tenets of Mormon theology. Joseph Smith can be characterized in many ways as a mystic, at least during the early years of his "ministry". As time passed, he became more control oriented and less inclined to allow people to seek their own path as he had initially advocated that they should. Because of Smith's initial philosophy of individual agency and seeking, many who reject Mormon authority continue to find some Mormon teachings useful metaphorically.

Joseph Smith, in many ways, knew how to enjoy the moment. He was a seeker of the first order who was not bound by convention and developed an initially simple philosophy and theology that attracted and uplifted many of the downtrodden of his day, including a number of my ancestors. He and those who came after him, regrettably, also knew how to manipulate and control others, which meant that the rank and file were taught obedience instead of the use of the very agency that Joseph personally exercised and made the basis for his theology. That is, what was good for the goose was not good for the gander.

And that, in my view, is the source of Mormonism's principal social problems. Its emphasis long ago became one of controlling individuals to achieve institutional ends instead of assisting individuals to find the path best suited to them. And so Mormons must be a particular kind of human being and do particular things. So it is best for the "Kingdom", and so they must be.