

Weaknesses into Strengths in Our Search for Knowledge

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I am grateful for the opportunity the administration affords me to speak to you today. I am particularly grateful for the friends and family who have gathered here to support me and for the special privilege of having my father and my mother, Larry and Kathy Hickman, in the audience. So much of what I have been able to become is due to them.

In the next few minutes I hope to make the case that through the grace of Christ's Atonement both you and I have been given the chance to receive the gift of the Holy Ghost in our reading, writing, and speaking in ways that will open our eyes to new knowledge and to better ways of thinking about the challenges that beset us.

For me, one of the most intriguing chapters of the Book of Mormon is Ether 12, in which Moroni pauses in his translation of the Jaredite record to catalogue the many miracles that occurred because of faith put into action. Partway through this list Moroni seems to face a crisis of his own faith—at least as it touches upon the future reception of the scriptural record that he is creating for an audience in our day and time. He writes:

And I said unto him: Lord, the Gentiles will mock at these things, because of our weakness in writing; for Lord thou hast made us mighty in word by faith, but thou hast not made us mighty in writing; for thou hast made all this people that they could speak much, because of the Holy Ghost which thou hast given them;

And thou hast made us that we could write but little, because of the awkwardness of our hands. Behold, thou hast not made us mighty in writing like unto the brother of Jared, for thou madest him that the things which he wrote were mighty even as thou art, unto the overpowering of man to read them.

Thou hast also made our words powerful and great, even that we cannot write them; wherefore, when we write we behold our weakness, and stumble because of the placing of our words; and I fear lest the Gentiles shall mock at our words.

[Ether 12:23–25]

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As an English professor whose own work focuses on twentieth-century and contemporary American literary history, several aspects of Moroni's concerns interest me. First, Moroni's sense of our time—that it would be an era characterized, among other things, by “mockery”—strikes me as unusually perceptive. Ours is indeed an age whose dominant mode is that of irony. On the heels of two world wars and many other regional ones, in the wake of some of the worst genocides in history, and in the aftermath of countless scandals in politics, business, and even religion, irony emerges in our day as a kind of cultural defense mechanism, a way of acknowledging that since things are rarely what they appear to be, nothing should be taken without the proverbial grain of salt.

In our day we luxuriate in an unprecedented omnipresence of information but paradoxically distrust this information more than ever because of its potential for manipulation or deceit. Also, the ability today to simulate reality has become so good that we live in a state that cultural critic Jean Baudrillard famously termed as “the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal,” perhaps even “the desert of the real itself.”¹

Under these conditions, some in our time allow cynicism to convince them that we have no way of knowing anything for sure, and many now frame the word *truth* in scare quotes to signal, even at the level of punctuation, a suspicion of the very notion of truth itself. In such a climate, conspiracy theory too often triumphs over systematic intellectual inquiry, and humankind—with its seemingly infinite capacity for what Pulitzer Prize-winning author Marilynne Robinson calls “self-befuddlement”—can “generate ideas that, however potent, are really, truly, and at very best worthless.”² Such is the widespread societal confusion described by Isaiah and quoted to us again by Nephi of our present-day world “as a dream of a night vision” in which

it shall be unto [us], even as unto a hungry man which dreameth, and behold he eateth but he awaketh and his soul is empty; or like unto a thirsty man which dreameth, and behold he drinketh but he awaketh and behold he is faint, and his soul hath appetite. [2 Nephi 27:3; see also Isaiah 29:8]

In an era like ours of existential disappointment and disillusion, of cynicism and confusion, why wouldn't irony and mockery reign not just as an avenue for humor but also as a paradigm for making one's way through life?

Second, Moroni's notion that our age, perhaps more than the ages that have preceded it, would focus on weaknesses in writing—and upon flaws in language generally—seems especially prophetic. Early in the twentieth century certain lines of inquiry in linguistics, philosophy, psychology, and cultural studies converged in their views about how language worked and to what degree it was determinative of human consciousness and agency. For a variety of reasons investigators in these fields increasingly realized the inherent arbitrariness in the words and other symbols we use to represent the concepts we want to relate and saw in that arbitrariness the capacity for miscommunication, misreading, and even misdirection. If this flawed language was perhaps constitutive of even our most basic sense of the reality we inhabit, how could we trust words to carry truth in the ways that earlier generations had imagined were possible?

To some degree I see this dilemma anticipated in our own eighth Article of Faith—“We believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly”—signaling a recognition on the part of the Prophet Joseph Smith that even scriptural language, especially when passed from one person to another through the ages and subjected to the process of translation (or, in some cases, mistranslation), could lose some of the power of its original signification along the way.

Finally, Moroni's worry about the placement of his words—that they would cause him to “stumble” in his scriptural prose—hits at the heart of my writerly self, as I too have often worried about the same thing. I suspect that you students have all felt this too—perhaps late at night, your brain fogged by a lack of sleep and the stupor brought on by too much junk food, as you try to finish a paper for one of your classes. Take that worry and magnify it many times over as you imagine the pressure on poor Moroni struggling with his translation, wondering how he might possibly capture the power of the original Jaredite record in his own clunky reformed Egyptian, and knowing that his eventual audience might make fun of whatever words he chose.

Thankfully for Moroni's sake, the Lord offers him consolation through a formula that we, like Moroni, would do well to understand:

And when I had said this, the Lord spake unto me, saying: Fools mock, but they shall mourn; and my grace is sufficient for the meek, that they shall take no advantage of your weakness;

And if men come unto me I will show unto them their weakness. I give unto men weakness that they may be humble; and my grace is sufficient for all men that humble themselves before me; for if they humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then will I make weak things become strong unto them.

Behold, I will show unto the Gentiles their weakness, and I will show unto them that faith, hope and charity bringeth unto me—the fountain of all righteousness. [Ether 12:26–28]

In His answer the Lord signals several truths to Moroni. First, He underscores the importance of weakness—in this case, both of readerly weakness and writerly weakness—in bringing Moroni and his eventual audience to a key choice: whether or not to choose humility as an opportunity to exert faith and to learn.

Moroni, it would appear, needed to be humble and meek in accepting that his writing was always going to need the Lord's grace to work correctly as scripture. Moroni's readers need to be humble and meek in not taking advantage of his weaknesses—those likely found in the scriptural writing itself and perhaps also in Moroni's briefly faltering faith that his writing would do what it was supposed to do when the time came. Once humility is in place for all parties, enabled by the grace of Christ's Atonement, then both Moroni and his audience can exert faith so that weak things can become strong for all involved, especially if those receiving Moroni's words are filled with charity, which will enable them not to take advantage of his weaknesses.

In 1903 my great-great-grandfather Josiah E. Hickman, then head of the physics department at BYU, addressed in a speech the importance of faith in discovering new knowledge. A portion of that speech was reprinted in the student newspaper, the *White and Blue*:

Columbus believed the earth round; Stevenson believed vehicles could be drawn by means of steam; Morse believed that thought could be flashed over wire by the aid of electricity; Marconi believed thoughts could be broadcast without a tangible medium; Joseph Smith believed that God could and would reveal himself. A faith in all of these unproved realities, accompanied with action, became household truths of a startled world. Faith is the harmonious struggle of all the powers of the mind towards knowing some unproved truth. . . . Without it, man becomes dead to the future and turns idolator to the present.³

How does the grace of the Lord enable our faith to help us to know truth and to avoid, as my great-great-grandfather said, becoming dead to the future and an “idolator to the present,” especially since those of us gathered here today have devoted significant time and resources in the pursuit of true knowledge?

Moroni himself gives us the answer in the final chapter of the Book of Mormon in what we often call Moroni's promise:

And when ye shall receive these things, I would exhort you that ye would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost.

And by the power of the Holy Ghost ye may know the truth of all things. [Moroni 10:4–5]

While we know this scripture first and foremost as the invitation to read and study the Book of Mormon and to learn that it is true, what Moroni outlines here, especially in the final sentence of his promise, frames a pattern for how earnest seekers of knowledge about a wide variety of subjects may be led to truth time and again.

The pattern of humility, of faith, and of weak things—in this sense, our weakness of knowledge—being made strong unto us by the Spirit is echoed over and over in the scriptures. Nephi writes:

For he that diligently seeketh shall find; and the mysteries of God shall be unfolded unto them, by the power of the Holy Ghost, as well in these times as in times of old, and as well in times of old as in times to come; wherefore, the course of the Lord is one eternal round. [1 Nephi 10:19]

We are even told that the knowledge of truth is inseparable from the Spirit, and we read in the Doctrine and Covenants that we

were also in the beginning with the Father; that which is Spirit, even the Spirit of truth;

And truth is knowledge of things as they are, and as they were, and as they are to come. [D&C 93:23–24]

If the acquisition of knowledge is an act of humility and faith on our part that is powered by personal revelation from the Holy Ghost, then we need to do all we can to take full advantage of the gift of the Holy Ghost in our lives. About one month ago I had the privilege of baptizing and confirming my youngest son, Isaac, a member of the Church of Jesus Christ. As part of his confirmation I told him—just as those of you who have been baptized and confirmed have been told—to “receive the Holy Ghost.” I believe that when we receive the Holy Ghost we receive not only the gift of a constant companion who can steer us to good choices instead of bad ones and can help us avoid temptation and danger but also a powerful teacher who can guide us to new knowledge that we can contribute to the world. How many of us have truly received the Holy Ghost as we were enjoined to do at our confirmations?

At the semiannual general conference of the Church in October 1958, Joseph Fielding Smith, then president of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, made the following observation and offered the following caution:

However, it is my judgment that there are many members of this Church who have been baptized for the remission of their sins, who have had hands laid upon their heads for the gift of the Holy Ghost, who have never received that gift, that is, the manifestations of it. Why? Because they have never put themselves in order to receive these manifestations. They have never humbled themselves. They have never taken the steps that would prepare them for the companionship of the Holy Ghost. Therefore they go through life without that knowledge, and they have not the understanding. . . .

Now the Lord would give us gifts. He will quicken our minds. He will give us knowledge that will clear up all difficulties, and put us in harmony with the commandments that he has given us, and with a knowledge that will be so deeply rooted in our souls that the knowledge can never be rooted out, if

*we will just seek for the light and the truth and the understanding which is promised to us, and which we can receive if we will only be true and faithful to every covenant and obligation pertaining to the gospel of Jesus Christ.*⁴

In my own imperfect experience, this process of humble and faithful inquiry leads to inspiration and knowledge about many things, even solutions to problems I have faced in my professional life here at BYU. These are undoubtedly some of the gifts to which President Smith refers.

One thing that people outside of academia, and often even students at universities, don't know is that when professors undergo a bid for tenure, it is an all-or-nothing proposition: either professors earn tenure (or what BYU calls "continuing faculty status") and have a nice measure of job security or they do not earn tenure, which results in their dismissal from the university, usually after another year is given to them so that they can secure another job elsewhere. Thus, while the reward of tenure is high, so is the risk—and so is the stress of getting there. In my pre-tenure years I worked assiduously to shore up my teaching, my publication record, and my service to the department and college so that I would meet the standard when the time came and so that I would establish good habits for my post-tenure career.

In one particular case I had the opportunity to publish one of my essays in a book by a prominent university press, but while the initial drafting and submission of the piece had gone smoothly, I struggled with getting the revised essay just the way the editor wanted it. To make matters worse, I had a long professional relationship with the editor of the book, so my repeated failed attempts to successfully revise the essay to meet the reviewers' expectations embarrassed me, as my friend had to tell me that the essay still wasn't the way it needed to be. He explained that if I couldn't revise the

essay to the reviewers' and the editor's satisfaction, it would not be included in the book and the project would move forward without my work in it.

Finally humbled, or perhaps compelled to be humble by the humiliation of the process, I did what I probably should have done long before: I knelt down in my office and prayed for Heavenly Father's help, asking that the Spirit would impress upon my mind what I needed to do to make the necessary changes to the essay so that it would be publishable. When I finished my prayer and sat back at my desk, I experienced what I think Joseph Smith meant by "pure intelligence flowing into you" and "sudden strokes of ideas"⁵ from the Spirit. I had concepts coming into my mind as if a faucet had turned on in my brain, and I raced to jot down these ideas before they were lost. I subsequently moved around entire sections of the essay, incorporated some new information into it that I hadn't before known existed, and generally shifted the tone and tenor of my writing in keeping with the promptings I had received. The editor was astonished at the revision and accepted the essay without any subsequent changes. It made it into the book, which now sits on my shelf as a tangible reminder of an experience that was entirely more unusual for me than it should have been.

Is it strange for a professor to pray over the literary history and criticism that he writes? How is that different than when Amulek admonishes us to "humble [ourselves]" and to "cry unto [God]" over our "fields, yea, over all [our] flocks [and] over the crops of [our] fields, that [we] may prosper in them" (Alma 34:19, 20, 24)? I do not know to this day Heavenly Father's specific opinion of my interpretation of Theodore Roethke's poetry and its place in the development of American poetry in the middle of the twentieth century. What I do know, though, is that He cares about me and He cares that I be able to disseminate this knowledge to which He led me in the service

of my family, my department, and my profession. I testify that He likewise cares about you and your pursuit of knowledge, and He will open your eyes to new ways of thinking about the intellectual challenges you face if you will allow the Spirit to provide you the revelation that you need in your sphere to advance your work.

I have found that the Spirit can also give me the knowledge and language that I need in unexpected, even extemporaneous, moments when I need to be wise beyond my own previous capacity. Recently I was reminded of something that happened to me as I presented my research at a national conference held during the same period of time as the first presidential run of Mitt Romney, himself an alumnus of BYU and a member of the Church. As you can probably recall, Romney's religion, its doctrines, and its practices were at the center of public discussion in an unprecedented way.

As I sat down to an evening banquet at the conference with many of my colleagues from universities across the country, two graduate students at my table saw "Brigham Young University" on my name tag and proceeded to relate a number of things they'd heard about the Church on a particular comedy show that, despite the show's reputation, these students found completely credible. They finished their all-too-lengthy anecdote with a pointed question for me: "We heard that Mormons wear 'magic underwear.' Do you wear the 'magic underwear'?"

I had not expected—at least at an academic conference populated by well-educated, open-minded professionals schooled in the humanities—to be asked such a question so bluntly and with such a lack of respect. I looked quickly around the table to see if my colleagues would rescue me, perhaps jumping in to point out the obvious impropriety of such a question at an academic banquet. Though I could tell that several of the professors were uncomfortable, they all turned and sat silently

blinking at me, apparently waiting for my response. No one was going to let me off the hook. I was going to have to find a way to be true to what I believed without making myself look like a fool in front of people I admired but who lacked almost all context for what I could tell them on this particular subject. Like Moroni, I didn't want to be mocked for the clumsiness of the words that I might choose.

The Lord tells us in the Doctrine and Covenants:

Therefore, verily I say unto you, lift up your voices unto this people; speak the thoughts that I shall put into your hearts, and you shall not be confounded before men;

For it shall be given you in the very hour, yea, in the very moment, what ye shall say. [D&C 100:5–6]

I swallowed hard and then spoke the words that came to my mind. I told these students that I was pretty sure they were referring to my temple garments and that just like many orthodox Jews who wear prayer shawls under their clothing to remind them of promises that they make to God about how they should live their lives, I too wear clothing that reminds me each day of promises I have made to God about how I will conduct myself in my daily decisions. I told them that from my experience any "magic" that my temple garments impart to me is simply from the blessings I receive for living the good life that I told God I'd live. Finally, after a slight pause, I asked those at the table, "Do any of you want to talk about your underwear?"

People burst into laughter at my question. The graduate students seemed appeased, if not a little ashamed, by the seriousness and attempted generosity of my answer to their inelegant question. Then, one by one, professors around the table talked about Mormons they had known and admired. Truth be told, I was relieved when the discussion shifted to another subject entirely. Still, I will always be

grateful that the Spirit gave me the knowledge and the words that I needed in that precise moment so that I didn't embarrass either the Church or myself in front of my colleagues.

Sometimes I think individuals might mistakenly think that following the promptings of the Holy Ghost will curtail rigorous academic inquiry and keep their scholarship sequestered in a provincial prison of what has already been thought and proven safe. They might erroneously reason that to be able to really think new thoughts we need to free ourselves from the tyranny of commandments and faith, pressing boldly into areas of intellect to which faith has previously blinded us. In my experience, nothing could be further from the truth. Don't we believe that "faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1)? In my view, faith always involves humbly asking that the Spirit take me from what I know to what I haven't yet discovered—wherever that takes me—strengthened by my belief.

Indeed, all Latter-day Saints should celebrate the ongoing process of restoration and revelation as outlined in the ninth Article of Faith:

We believe all that God has revealed, all that He does now reveal, and we believe that He will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God.

Since the Doctrine and Covenants instructs us that the kingdom of God concerns itself not just with what we might think of as spiritual matters but also with "things both in heaven and in the earth, and under the earth; things which have been, things which are, things which must shortly come to pass; things which are at home, things which are abroad; the wars and the perplexities of the nations, and the judgments which are on the land; and a knowledge also of countries and of kingdoms" (D&C 88:79), then the Spirit has many fields

of inquiry that are white and ready to harvest by a scholar with a humble heart and a sharp mind.

For me, having the Lord make weak things strong unto me as my faith meets intellectual inquiry is a process that I hope will someday culminate in something like that which happened to the servant of Elisha in the Old Testament. You will recall that the Syrian king was exasperated that the Lord kept revealing Syria's military strategy to Elisha, who would in turn pass it along to the king of Israel to aid him in foiling the Syrian enemy's plans. In retribution the Syrian army surrounded the city in which Elisha resided with horses and chariots, hoping to eliminate Elisha as the source of heaven-sent reconnaissance once and for all. Elisha's servant, upon seeing the huge army hemming them in, despaired and said to Elisha:

Alas, my master! how shall we do?

And [Elisha] answered, Fear not: for they that be with us are more than they that be with them.

And Elisha prayed, and said, Lord, I pray thee, open his eyes, that he may see. And the Lord opened the eyes of the young man; and he saw: and, behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha. [2 Kings 6:15–17]

Ultimately, faithful intellectuals—ones who know that humility is not a liability but an asset, that faith is not a set of blinders but an eye-opening experience, and that the gift of the Holy Ghost is not a coward's crutch but a courageous revelator of the truth of all things—will see that the grace of Jesus Christ enlivens and informs every corner of knowledge that we can discover, blessing us and those with whom we share what we learn.

I would like to again quote Marilynne Robinson, this time from her novel *Gilead*, when an aged pastor close to death reflects on how the Lord can open our eyes to new knowledge if we will let Him:

*It has seemed to me sometimes as though the Lord breathes on this poor gray ember of Creation and it turns to radiance—for a moment or a year or the span of a life. And then it sinks back into itself again, and to look at it no one would know it had anything to do with fire, or light. . . . But the Lord is more constant and far more extravagant than it seems to imply. Wherever you turn your eyes the world can shine like transfiguration. You don't have to bring a thing to it except a little willingness to see. Only, who could have the courage to see it?*⁶

It is my hope that we will have the humility, the faith, the charity, and the willingness to receive the gift of the Holy Ghost necessary to be able to see our respective corners of the world shine like transfiguration in our own intellectual and academic inquiry. It is likewise my hope that we will have the Lord's help not to stumble on our words and that we will have the courage to see what needs to be seen and to say what needs to be said, however unpopular the view and however it may disturb the received logic of the time in which we live. May we ever pursue true knowledge,

eventually finding for ourselves in the journey that all truth indeed is part of one great and eternal round, capacious enough to explain all the mysteries of the universe.

In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Jean Baudrillard, "Simulacra and Simulations," in *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, 2nd ed., ed. Mark Poster (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 169.
2. Marilynne Robinson, *When I Was a Child I Read Books* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), 192, 193.
3. "The Last Part of Professor Hickman's Famous Speech on 'Ingersoll,'" *White and Blue*, 27 May 1903, 4, as quoted in Ernest L. Wilkinson and W. Cleon Skousen, *Brigham Young University: A School of Destiny* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1976), 214–15.
4. Joseph Fielding Smith, *CR*, October 1958, 21–22.
5. *Teachings*, 151.
6. Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2004), 245.