

# An Echo from the Foothills: To Marshal the Forces of Reason

*L. Jackson Newell*

*I have sworn upon the altar of God eternal  
hostility against every form of tyranny  
over the mind of man.*

— Thomas Jefferson  
*Letter to Benjamin Rush, 1800*

I offer here a personal response to the increasingly stern demands for conformity and the growing number of disciplinary actions that are being voiced and carried out by our Mormon leadership. Obedience, they frequently admonish us, is the first law of the Church. Their concern, it seems, is that Latter-day Saints are being alienated or disillusioned by the surfacing of new primary documents from the early days of the movement, by the carefully researched histories being written each year by professional historians both within and without the fold, and by the well-financed and sophisticated attacks of anti-Mormons who seek to undermine the foundations of the Church and destroy the faith of its members. My concern is that their response to these conditions, which this essay will examine, itself looms as a grave threat to our traditions, our values, and our doctrines. I am being asked to substantially alter what I believe, no cause for notice perhaps, except that it would involve diminishing my personal relationship with God, my faith in the essential goodness of humankind, and my trust in free institutions. These values I am not prepared to surrender.

I should first note that I joined the LDS Church twenty-three years ago as a young scholar — impressed by a Mormon friend's obvious comfort with the

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belief that human and divine knowledge are a compatible whole, and inspired by the robust confidence of a Mormon apostle who frequently and forthrightly proclaimed the importance to Latter-day Saints of what he called freedom of the mind. "We must preserve it in the Church and in America and resist all efforts of earnest men to suppress it," he said, "for when it is suppressed, we might lose the liberties vouchsafed to us in the Constitution of the United States." He also warned:

There are forces at work in our society today which degrade an intellectual quest for knowledge. These forces are nothing new. They have always been powerful. They are anti-intellectual. . . . The Know-Nothings of the last century in this country could be cited as one example. Germany in the thirties saw the burning of books . . . as part of the tragedy of Hitlerism.

This apostle called upon members to "exercise your God-given right to think through every proposition that is submitted to you and be unafraid to express your opinions, with proper respect for those to whom you talk and proper acknowledgment of your own shortcomings" (Brown 1969).

I have cited these words of President Hugh B. Brown before. They matter greatly to me. As I approached baptism, I studied and believed, and I identified with Elder Brown's approach to the faith, feeling confident I would never be trapped by demands for blind obedience. These concepts remain at the center of my religious life. Whether or not they are still a part of official belief, they are an inseparable part of my own.

President Gordon B. Hinckley's recent affirmation that "Fundamental to our theology is belief in individual freedom of inquiry, thought, and expression" is a notable exception (Hinckley 1985). But taken in the context of these five contemporaneous statements and actions by other Church leaders, his words appear almost sentimental:

The rewriting and refilming of Elder Ronald Poelman's October 1984 Conference address, originally a rare and inspiring defense of free agency, so that it became yet another cry for obedience. His text was not edited — his ideas were turned inside out (Fletcher 1985).

Carlisle Hunsaker's removal from the University of Utah's LDS Institute of Religion faculty at the end of the 1985 school year, apparently for writing prize-winning essays for *DIALOGUE* and *Sunstone*, without being accorded the right to defend his actions or face those who made the decision to force him out.

Lifelong members Valeen Avery and Linda Newell being prohibited in June 1985 from speaking within the Church about the fruits of their nine-year research project on Emma Smith, without being notified, given reasons, or provided a chance to defend their research before the decision had been implemented.

Elder Dallin Oaks's 16 August 1985 speech at BYU in which he states that Mormons "persistently disdain the comfortable fraternity of ecumenical Christianity," that "evil speaking of the Lord's anointed is in a class by itself," be they general or local, and that "it does not matter that the criticism is true" (Oaks 1985).

Stanley Larson's forced resignation from the LDS Church Translation Department in September 1985, without notice, as a result of a scholarly paper he wrote which examines the relationship between the Book of Mormon and various biblical translations.

For different reasons, each of these events struck close to me and to what I believe. Elder Poelman's original address was the most inspiring I had heard in conference in years, an expression of trust in members' ability to act from their own understanding of gospel principles, an open honoring of free agency. I know firsthand Carlisle's unique ability to work with LDS college students, because his students were often my students at a different hour of the day. I watched Linda and Val struggle mightily to be fair and balanced in their treatment of all the major actors in the Emma biography, and I share my children's bewilderment in seeing their mother disciplined for acting on two of the most hallowed values taught both at home and at church — honesty and fairness. Finally, as one whose profession it is to generate, protect, and disseminate human knowledge and to safeguard the healthy, systematic skepticism by which this knowledge is refined, I am shocked by recent attacks on that knowledge and on the principles of free inquiry and free expression on which it is based.

After further reflection, however, I do agree wholly with one of the points enunciated by Elder Oaks. We should not criticize Church authorities. Personal attacks always diminish the dignity of individual and community life and are never appropriate in government, business, or religion. On the other hand, the respectful and constructive criticism of a leader's ideas or judgments is not only acceptable but necessary for healthy organizational life. In this spirit I will proceed to examine the implications of the increasing calls from LDS leaders for members to follow their counsel, and the escalating actions they are taking against scholars and scholarship.

Looking back at the five recent events that have so affected me and some people I care very much about, I feel compelled to advance a proposal. It is this: That a few representatives of the scholarly community meet in good faith for a half-day retreat with an equal number of Church leaders to discuss the principles that underpin current tensions. If successful in even a modest degree, we might succeed in breaking the long impasse that saps, and has sapped, so much good will, time, and energy from all concerned. The agenda for such a retreat might include the possible establishment of avenues for resolving issues that continue to arise as the growing secular knowledge of our history encounters some of the traditional claims of our religion. The growing subscribership of *DIALOGUE* and burgeoning attendance at B. H. Roberts Society and Sunstone Symposium meetings provide ample evidence that a Mormon constituency exists that would benefit by opportunities to discuss with Church leaders means appropriate to resolve the competing claims of reason and faith.

This is a significant community of Latter-day Saints who cherish both their faith and their scholarly integrity — and have proven remarkably tenacious in holding on to both, even when some forces within the Church seem determined to force them to choose between intellectual honesty and institutional loyalty. This proposal, of course, can only work if the parties involved accept each other as people of high principle and good intent. I think, and I fervently hope, that this is entirely possible. Until it happens, however, the complex issue of obedience will continue to occupy a prominent place in the minds of many Mormons.

What then are the implications of these recent events for obedience — which is commonly defined as “the quality of being submissive to control.” Do Hunsaker, Newell, and Avery accept punishment without due process and neither object nor expect redress? Do I contribute to unfortunate tensions with others in the family of Judeo-Christian religions and other world religions by not expressing my own very positive view of ecumenical cooperation? Do we all passively note the increasing references to obedience as the first commandment, and the passing of free agency as a tangible LDS belief, without remembering the beauty of Matthew 22:36–40, or the savage rationalizations and emotions that led to Dachau, My Lai, or Mountain Meadows? The obedience path is one which has a ditch on either side, and I am convinced that present fears of the disorder on the one side are pushing us toward the abyss on the other.

The abyss is described by Stanley Milgram in his 1974 book, *Obedience to Authority*, which reports his extensive work on the destructive consequences of blind obedience — of being submissive to control from others. In a famous series of laboratory experiments begun at Yale University and repeated at different sites around the world, student assistants were instructed by university researchers to administer electric shocks to fellow students who were participating in a study to determine the effect of negative feedback on learning. The more mistakes the learner made, the higher the intensity of the charge sent by the student behind the one-way glass. As the learners writhed increasingly from the pain being inflicted upon them when they made mistakes, some of the student assistants said they did not want to hurt the subjects and wished to stop. Their consciences were speaking to them. When reassured by the white-jacketed scholars that this was an important experiment that had to be carried on to conclusion and that many other people had been willing to carry through with these same responsibilities in previous runs of the experiment, most of the students proceeded to inflict well-nigh unbearable suffering, even when those behind the glass begged and pleaded to be unwired and one subject screamed, “I’ve got a weak heart!”, then slumped in his chair. In truth, the electric shocks were not actually being sent; the recipients were all actors. The real subjects in the study were the student assistants themselves. Milgram was trying to determine the limits of obedience and the vulnerability of personal conscience when *authority* and *precedent* press hard against it. He was sobered by what he found. A pre-experiment prediction was that not even one in a hundred assistants would go to the limit of the electronic equipment. In reality, nearly two-thirds of them did.

Why did students lack the courage to say no to their superiors? The fact that the experiment was described to them as being highly important, the assurances that others had obediently carried these responsibilities through in the past, and the air of confidence shown by the authorities, all contributed to the successful suppression of personal judgment and the courage to act on it. When interviewed following the experiments, many of the students said they felt sure what they were doing was wrong, but their belief that they were part of something larger, and the authorities’ calm assurances, led them to surrender the claims of their own conscience.

People of any age, but especially the young, are susceptible to control by others. This is particularly true among Mormons, precisely because of our strong emphasis on respecting those in authority. Even those who believe that obedience to religious authorities can never be excessive must recognize that a blindly obedient mentality nurtured within a religious context can lead to extreme vulnerability outside it. The scale of scams and success of swindlers in Utah is one evidence that Mormons too easily defer judgment to others if, for whatever reason, they decide to trust them. An obedient people is a people easily led — by whoever comes along.

The analogy of the *fasces* — the bundle of flimsy sticks bound tightly with cords to form a mighty instrument — is often used to justify organizational discipline and obedience to a single person or elite. It illustrates the strength of directed thought and action, yet despite the fact that this image appeared on the American dime for decades, we must remember that it was the symbol from which the fascists (or Nazis) took their name. Willingness to blindly accept orders from other persons involves the transfer of control from inside the self to an external locus. The individual feels an increasing sense of duty to the leaders but *loses* a sense of responsibility for his or her own actions and their consequences, thus producing the “crimes of obedience” that have ravaged virtually all totalitarian societies and from which no society or group can claim immunity.

Free societies, however, are based on the ideal that each individual is an irreducible, independent moral agent. Those who are able to think for themselves, are not only essential to the existence of free institutions but also fully prepared to enjoy and benefit from the blessings of life itself. For them, obedience is to principles, not persons; an informed conscience is their guide. General Alexander W. Doniphan possessed the unusual courage to resist a written military order, and Joseph Smith was spared execution on the morning of 1 November 1838 (HC 3:190–99). We honor Doniphan for *disobeying* his military superior; his ultimate loyalty was to principle.

The irony today, regarding the obedience issue within the LDS Church, is that distinctions are rarely made between loyalty to leaders and loyalty to principle. It is simply assumed that they are one and the same. Yet this union would require a claim of infallibility, not only for the president of the Mormon Church but for the entire priesthood. Omni-infallibility. Since such a claim has never been made and scriptures clearly warn us about the dangers of exercising unrighteous dominion (D&C 121:39), we inevitably face the task of making distinctions about obedience. My ultimate loyalty may be to God, but how do I know God’s will? Through the study of scripture? By listening to Church leaders? By applying gospel principles? Or, by sensing the still small voice? These sources of understanding are not always consistent; but even if they were, they could not fully anticipate or inform every action or judgment I must make. New situations constantly confront me; only an enlightened and prayerful conscience can blend divine intent with personal knowledge to guide my decisions. No one has the wisdom or right to do this for me.

Gospel principles and the Church are not synonymous. But one reason these concepts have become so blurred is that we seem to be making obedience

to Church into a *terminal* principle, rather than an *instrumental* one. It has become an end in itself. Therein lies the confusion about the first commandment: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it. Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (Matt. 22:37-40). Loyalty to God and love of neighbor are the ends. Obedience to enduring principles is a means. Once obedience itself becomes an end, however, the believer no longer takes full responsibility for the consequences of his or her own actions. If things go awry, the sin be on someone else's head. Never mind those sinned against. Fortunately, "love thy neighbor as thyself," the ultimate principle, dams this stream of faulty reasoning.

*The True Believer* (1964), Eric Hoffer's insightful analysis of mass movements during and after World War II, suggests that unity and obedience are indeed necessary. Once they gather momentum, however, they are always risky. People must be galvanized by certain values and directed toward certain ends if anything is to be done for the common good. In democracies, this is usually accomplished with a light hand. But Churchill created a powerful mass movement in England, as did Roosevelt in America, to suppress the Nazi menace. And in the same era, Gandhi led a mass movement in India to free his country of its English overlords.

Mass movements by their nature cause individuals to suspend their own judgment and accept the discipline of trusted leaders to accomplish a task that is considered necessary for the survival of hallowed values or the society itself. The towering leaders of liberating mass movements such as Lincoln, Gandhi, and perhaps even Brigham Young, are generally awed by what they create and gravely fearful of its consequences for ill, as well as for good. Thus, we fully appreciate the Gettysburg Address only after we understand Lincoln's relief (expressed in the address) from the immense burden he bore for so long — the possibility that the excesses and horrors of the Civil War might have been in vain. His astonishingly quick forgiveness of Southern leaders was not for their benefit alone. He knew the consequences for the North, and for the Union as a whole, of letting the emotions and discipline of the crisis remain unchecked. Likewise, Gandhi's abhorrence of violence in the struggle for Indian independence and his preoccupation with the danger that loomed from the unleashing of Moslem and Hindu power and emotions arose from his knowledge that these forces might be turned (as they eventually were) into a mindless and lethal clash between Moslems and Hindus after the British pulled out.

Beneficial mass movements, according to Hoffer, generate the same assaults on human dignity as bad ones. The only difference is that good ones are necessary evils to suppress forces that are even worse. Good ones, therefore, have *specific purposes* and are *stopped abruptly* when the crises that called them forth pass. The longer the crisis, however, the greater the risk that the movement will turn inward upon itself. China's Cultural Revolution which ended a decade ago provides dramatic evidence. Mao's idea of a "perpetual revolu-

tion" became an exercise in collective suicide. The longer obedience is required, the more it must be checked by reason, considered in open discussion, and tested against the conscience of individuals. With no obedience, social life is impossible and anarchy prevails. With too much of it, emotions trammel reason and we simply substitute organized oppression for random violence.

Today in the Mormon Church we are witnessing a well-intentioned response to a perceived threat which, nonetheless, is doing violence to the freedom, dignity, and rights of members. The seeming threat is to the historical and spiritual foundations of the faith, the authenticity of traditional accounts of Joseph's visions, and the origins of the Book of Mormon. In response, LDS leaders are calling for a closing of ranks to limit the flow of disturbing information and to inoculate members against the spreading dis-ease. It is important for us to consider, however, the consequences of creating the kind of movement that is now afoot.

Perhaps it would be well at this point to examine what *is* afoot. We are witnessing disturbing efforts to undermine confidence in virtually all unofficial sources of understanding about our past — the work of professional historians, intellectuals in general, the free press, the free discussion of ideas, and free access to information. For a people who have been taught that the Declaration of Independence, Bill of Rights, and the Constitution of the United States are inspired documents, these are astonishing developments. And for members who hallow the Thirteenth Article of Faith, who have been urged to read "out of the best books" of our civilization, and who have made Doctrine and Covenants 88:118 their own, this is nothing less than setting one of our great traditions at war with the other.

The ecclesiastical way and the critical (or rational) way to understanding, to draw two notions from Duncan Howlett's (1980) recent treatise on the history of religion, have grown side by side in western civilization for over 2,500 years. When left to themselves, they balance and refine each other. Over the centuries, prophecies have been tested against reason and experience to render at least some religious error innocuous. Similarly, we know the perils of "the full mind and the empty heart," thanks to the insight of prophets both modern and ancient, just as they have warned us about uncritically accepting the wisdom of the wise.

It is precisely this long and delicate tradition of complementarity between the ecclesiastical way and the rational way to knowledge that is now threatened. When truth is defined simply as what the leaders say it is, when membership requires the sublimation of personal moral judgment, when freedom within the fold is achieved by choosing silence rather than speech, and when facts are not valid until endorsed by those in authority — and each of these statements is perilously close to reality — then I believe the hour is late. It is time that we all muster the courage, leaders and members together, to pursue in good faith open and earnest discussions concerning the relationships we share.

Until we do this, we will continue to witness a flight from the reasonable middle ground where belief flourishes in open country, and doubt and commit-

ment exist comfortably on the same landscape. Increasingly, current policies attempt to shepherd the faithful into a fortress where they are constantly assured of the inspiration of their leaders and protected from the siege. Those who harbor legitimate doubts, be they committed or not, or those who insist upon their right to exercise independent moral judgment, or those who refuse to cast secular knowledge aside, are made to feel unworthy or unwelcome. Presumably to protect those inside the keep, some leaders seem determined to drive these members away or isolate them — by instructing the orthodox to discount the faith or suspect the motives of anyone whose ideas differ from their own. This is a prescription for discord, poison in the community well. We are now being warned to guard against “the unrighteous use of truth” — a principle that enables us to dismiss any information we don’t like and criticize others for not doing likewise. For example, BYU students and faculty were recently instructed by a member of the Quorum of the Twelve that if “truth is used by anyone in any degree of unrighteousness, others here in the spirit of *unity* must act, bearing a responsibility *to turn* and to help enlarge that person’s perspective” (Nelson 1985; italics in original). Given this roving grass-roots commission to correct others’ beliefs and actions, how long will this peer-administered discipline remain as civil discussion among colleagues rather than oppressive intimidation by those who feel they have been commissioned to ensure orthodoxy?

These are the perils over which Lincoln and Gandhi agonized, and the dangers averted through much of our Church history by greater tolerance for diversity of opinion and action within the leadership and among the membership. In religion as in politics I share the faith of Jefferson, who said in his First Inaugural Address, “Error of opinion may be tolerated where reason is left free to combat it.”

The points of view I have expressed here are not new. I have drawn from Church doctrine and Church history, and I have tapped some of the classic works of contemporary scholarship. From these sources I have simply re-assembled a timeless argument which connects the dignity of human life with respect for individuals and their right to think and act from an informed, reflective, and even prayerful conscience. As a young convert to the Church I heard these ideas beautifully proclaimed from the Mormon mountaintop. Now, in my middle years, I echo them from the foothills. Like the echo, I reflect what I have heard. I am no longer confident that anyone is listening up there, but that’s not why I speak. I speak simply because I must.

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