

# ON THE MORMON COMMITMENT TO EDUCATION

MARDEN J. CLARK

In one of the more imaginative chapters of that remarkably imaginative trilogy *Lord of the Rings*, J. R. R. Tolkien describes an Entmoot, a conference of giant tree-like creatures called Ents. Sam and Merry, two of the Hobbits in the original Fellowship of the Ring, have come into the Ents' forest and have finally convinced old Treebeard, their leader, of the grave danger not only to their domain but to all of Middle Earth from the rising power of evil embodied in Sauron, the Evil One of Mordor, and in Saruman, a good wizard gone bad. The Ents are not a "hasty" people, but the danger is grave and imminent, hence the Moot takes *only* three days: two to absorb and consider the facts, and less than one to decide that the Ents shall journey to Isengard to aid in the fight against Saruman. The decision is an important one for the forces of good. The Ents, themselves practically indestructible, are able with their root-like feet to destroy the great rocky fortress that is Isengard and to divert the river so that it fills in all the crevices where the Orcs hide and covers with a great murky lake the kingdom of Saruman.

Coupled with my own relief at the coming victory (Tolkien evokes with unusual power the sense of evil and the absolute significance of the battle between Good and Evil), came a renewed awareness and awe at the fact of life in the whole of one of those giant redwoods that I have watched quiver at its tips in a breeze. But thinking back on my experience of the novel has made me aware of implications that run far deeper.

To apply some of these concepts to something so widely acknowledged and praised as the Mormon commitment to education may seem unnecessary and even foolhardy, especially since I am not going to be entirely complimentary. Perhaps I should simply have gone into Moot with myself and let it last indefinitely, or with some of my wiser and more reasonable friends and colleagues and let myself be dissuaded.

But in a sense I *have* been in a Moot with myself for a long time now. And I have become convinced that something is happening to the Mormon commitment to education, something that vitiates, even undercuts that commitment and threatens the highest expressions of it in the day-to-day business of education. Let me first grant (not take for granted) the positive accomplishments: the magnificent campus, fine faculty, and wonderful student body at Brigham Young University; the other Church colleges and schools; the wide-flung seminary and institute system; the statistics that show Utah and Mormons generally well in the front in total effort to support education, in percentage of college graduates, in literacy, in most of the comparative tests by which commitment to education can be measured. With so much, I should be more than

willing to settle for simply being left alone, as the Ents simply wanted to be, to pursue my own particular educational goals and contribute as much as I can to the broader ones of the Church.

The achievements and the commitment grow, I need hardly comment, from a dynamic concept of man's earthly life as part of an eternal quest, in which the goal, though we define it as the Celestial Kingdom, is always receding upward as we conceive it higher and higher (even eventual godhood is only a step along the way) until the quest itself becomes almost the goal, subsumed in that wonderful Mormon phrase "Eternal Progress." Two Mormon expressions translate much of that dynamic concept of man's destiny into its educational implications: "The glory of God is intelligence" (which can be simply descriptive but is surely sensed as an imperative to seek intelligence, as on the beehive emblem), and "Man is saved no faster than he gains knowledge." Like my Hobbit friends, all Mormons are on a quest, but with the difference that where the Hobbits sought only to destroy the Ring and hence the power of Evil, the Mormon seeks to know and even to create the highest possible Good, whether he defines it as the Kingdom of God, the Celestial Kingdom, or Eternal Progression. And education, in things both spiritual and temporal, has traditionally been the most fundamental means of carrying on the quest — or if not the most fundamental, then second only to "the first principles and ordinances" and perhaps to *work*.

All this implies an attitude so dynamic and creative that one wonders how it can possibly be reduced to anything less than the highest commitment to education. And yet I see and hear much that disturbs me. Most of it is tied to and reveals a fundamentally defensive attitude toward education. Here detailed documentation would be both unnecessary and tedious. Let me simply couple two expressions and then set them alongside other phenomena Mormons will find the expressions familiar. First, the one that perhaps bothers me most: "The wisdom of men is foolishness in the sight of the Lord." Most often this comes in a context which relates wisdom of men with (my second expression) the "learning of men," of which we are so often counseled to beware. Because secular schools teach the learning of men, the Church system, we are told, can justify its existence only as it protects or contributes to the student's testimony. In fact the worst crime a professor could commit would be to destroy a student's testimony. Now couple such injunctions with other pertinent phenomena: the shortage of creative achievement within the Church, the lack of a really strong graduate program in the Church's university, what Sam Taylor defined (even allowing for exaggeration) as the Mormon "controlled press," the oft-lamented difficulty of scholars in getting at documents in the Church archives, the widespread distrust of the "intellectual" in the Church, the growth of fundamentalist religious attitudes and ultra-conservative political attitudes in the Church.

Even if we find recent improvement in some or all of these, I do not think I misread the evidence that they are very real phenomena, that they are closely related, that they add up to and help produce a basically defensive attitude toward education, and that such an attitude runs counter to the highest educational and creative impulses in Mormonism.

Not that the reasons for the attitude are hard to understand. One would have to be blind indeed to work within the educational process and not recognize it as a two-edged weapon. A little learning is a dangerous thing. But I'm

not as convinced as Pope that even drinking deep at the Pierian spring removes the danger. I suspect that the danger of educating oneself out of the Church has been exaggerated. It may even be, as at least one of my friends insists, that one never educates himself out of the Church, one inactivates himself out of it. But I question that it is this simple. Whatever else, education can plant the doubts that make easy the inactivating. I suspect that Jack Burden in Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men* is closer to the real truth. "You can't know," Burden says, "whether knowledge will kill you or cure you." But, he concludes, you open the telegram, though you might be safer and more comfortable in not knowing what is inside, "for the end of man is to know." The expression resonates richly, tying back especially to the Garden, where the end of man in his innocence came with the partaking of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil — which was also the beginning of man as we know him now.

Yes, one can understand the basic mistrust — and sympathize. But, as President Joseph Fielding Smith reminded us in October Conference several years ago, Adam *had* to partake of that fruit to fulfill the conflicting injunction. And like President Smith, I am glad that he did. It made possible my being here too, and also my being able to know what little I do know — and that little is precious indeed.

Not that I would want to oppose the learning of men to that of God. Far from it. I recognize only too well that man's mind can lead him astray, sometimes far astray. But I cannot escape the logic that whatever man truly comes to know — that is, anything certain about things as they have been, things as they are, things as they will be — must constitute not only man's truth but God's truth as well. Man may grope blindly and blunder frighteningly along the way. Indeed, it is part of his condition as man that he must. But very little of what I would call the significant learning of man has come from men willfully scheming or evil or opposed in any real sense to men or God. Certainly the Galileos, the Newtons, even the Darwins were earnestly seeking men striving toward truths that the evidence they found suggested to them. And I cannot help being impressed by their findings, just as I am by the vast "explosion" of knowledge that like its most spectacular product, the atom bomb, keeps mushrooming until our knowledge of fact and process becomes awesome and frightening in the power that inheres in such knowledge. But to the extent that any of it is real fact, real truth, it must constitute both man's and God's truth.

The logic for "knowing" other forms of the learning of man — philosophy, art, music, literature — is hardly so neat, but even more compelling. Most of it is subsumed under whatever is "virtuous, lovely, or of good report, or praiseworthy." I can witness in awe the mushrooming radiation-charged cloud, the televised images of men walking on the moon or close-up pictures of Venus, the pictures of projected super-sonic transports. But not even these practical results of the learning of man can affect me with anything like the different awe with which I contemplate the struggles of a Spinoza to bring under logical control the contradictions and complexities of experience, or the splendor of Dali's *Christus*, or the majesty of Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*, or the complexly human-sublime cosmic journey of Dante through Hell to his ultimate vision, or the terrible rapture of the ending of *King Lear*.

To try to measure the effects of such obviously immeasurable human crea-

tions against the more or less measurable effects of discoveries, inventions, and creations in the material world is of course meaningless in one way. And yet our sense of comparative values insists on the attempt, even if only as a response to our personal experience. No world has stood trembling in fear of destruction before any work of art, though I have trembled myself and seen whole audiences tremble in rhapsody during a great concert or drama. W. H. Auden laments in a poetic tribute to Yeats that art never makes anything happen. But he is manifestly wrong. If nothing else, it creates more art. That is, more art gets created, simply as response to what is or to what gets performed, as any artist, major or minor, can testify. And that is much: the inspiring of others to create — it may well be as high an effect as one could ask for. Creativity creates creativity. But we all know other things that happen. As I write I am listening — for at least the fiftieth time — to Henryk Szeryng playing Brahms' Violin Concerto. And something is happening in me: some response to the sheer loveliness of melody, to the sheer virtuosity of both performer and composer through those remarkable cadenzas. I suppose no one could measure the difference in me once the record has finished. I fear I will go on getting irritated or angry, feeling other base emotions, shouting at my family. But right now I'm in the presence of sublimity. And I know it. I am able to recognize it. That is the point.

For it wasn't always thus. Far too recently I first heard part of this concerto — or first heard it with enough musical consciousness to know what I was hearing. I listened enraptured. But in retrospect I was also disturbed: forty-five and just happening onto *this*. I suspect that I had had about as much musical awareness in my growing up as most people: piano lessons in childhood, the band during high school (an unusually fine one under an unusually fine director), an early experience of the Tabernacle Choir's rendition of the *Messiah*, "Music and the Spoken Word" on radio, an occasional concert through lyceum programs. But something has happened since that afternoon with Brahms. Perhaps it would have happened anyway. My daughter had given me Beethoven's Ninth two years before, my son had given me Mahler's First the year before, and we finally bought a stereo to play them on.

This bit of personal history would hardly pay its way did I not believe it typical. The point, of course: where I had passively accepted what came along in music, I now seek after these things. My record collection grows slowly, but it grows. I watch for the concert hours on FM. My musical tastes are reaching out to where I didn't even know music to exist. Multiply such personal development in taste, appreciation, capacity to enjoy on an ever higher level, by a corresponding increase in all others who, during my time and through the centuries, have experienced a similar process — and then tell me art makes nothing happen. Perhaps not much that we can directly trace to art. But who can measure even the practical effects of these changes that take place in the deepest and loftiest parts of a human's being? With others, I can only say, "There I was; here I am now. I'm different. And I continue to change."

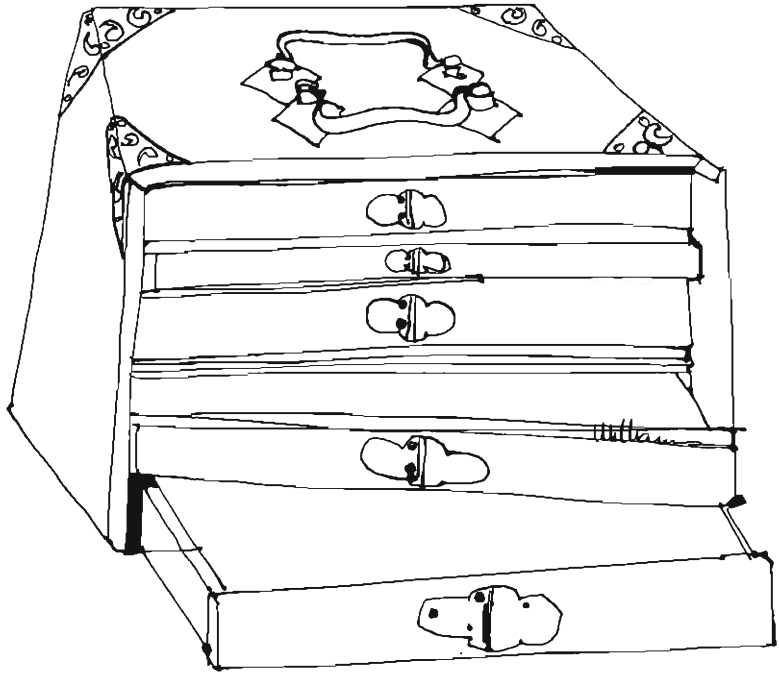
Immeasurable, such expressions are. And in two senses: incapable of being measured, but also immeasurable as is almost anything we contemplate with appreciation and love and awe and reverence. I choose the words "with real intent." For I insist on a relationship between human and divine creativity. Just as I have to accept God's creation of man as the highest evidence of His

creativity, so I have to accept man's finest creativity as the highest evidence of his direct descent from God, and of his own potential divinity. Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* may be the product of a man. But the man is product of God.

So my Mormon background and experience tells me. To hear any of those great achievements or even much lesser ones belittled either directly or by inference as the mere learning of man, as something that is foolishness in the sight of God, pains me to the depths of my religious and professional being. I can understand Paul's exhorting in such terms the saints at Corinth against pride in learning and toward humility. I can understand the Lord through Isaiah condemning a proud and iniquitous people and warning that "the wisdom of their wise men shall perish." I can understand Jacob inveighing with his Nephite brethren against man's pride and foolishness and learning. But in all these contexts the prophet was condemning a wisdom that sets itself in opposition to God's — in pride not in humility. What I can't understand is anyone's using these passages to nullify all the others in which we are exhorted to seek wisdom and learning; for "happy is the man that findeth wisdom." Or using these passages to lump together and condemn all man's efforts to know and understand himself, his universe, even his God. Paul's own apostrophe to Charity is scripture, but it is also a man's wonderful song to his brethren, trying to raise them to real charity in their lives. We glorify it as scripture, we do not condemn it as the learning of man. And when I teach *King Lear* or *Paradise Lost* or Yeats' poems or even *The Sound and the Fury*, I don't want to have to apologize for them as the learning of man, I want to sing them as the *creations* of man, the creation of God. That world Tolkien creates, even with its horrors, is full of fresh, natural beauty and full of artistic beauty. Both deserve being sung.

All of this lies behind my sense of the Mormon commitment to education and my distaste for anything that suggests a defensive attitude. Even granting the dangers and risks, the end of man is to know — and to create new and significant things to "know." I turn now to some of the specifics implied in that commitment.

The Mormon commitment to education implies a genuine respect for both the process of education and the product. Not mere blind respect; process and product are too often faulty. But the implied respect is, in a sense, simply the inverse of what causes the commitment in the first place. That is, Mormons conceive of education itself as ultimately vital — ultimately in the sense that ultimate or cosmic things are at stake, vital in the sense of alive, positive, creative in its own right. For no Mormon should education be merely a means of preparation for earning a living or bettering oneself in one's profession. It disturbs me to hear even graduate students talk of a thesis on some insignificant problem so as to "get it over with," to "get the badge" — as if the badge were all, the process nothing, and the result external, not internal. The only true measure of the product, I suppose, would be a kind of total apperception of what one is, after having gone through the process. Such a judgement would be possible only through the eyes of Deity. But only if one conceives the process itself as vital, as itself creating new and higher potential, can we hope for the highest product, in any but the merely practical sense. And of course respect for the product has to imply the opposite of the strong distrust of the intellectual within the Church.



As a corollary, the commitment to education implies a strong commitment to research and creative activity. If we really respect both process and product, then we will regard the process at least as important in a faculty as in students. More important. For only as the faculty member "gets out on the cutting edge of his discipline," only as he is himself helping push out the frontiers of knowledge, is the process itself carried to its logical end: the creation of new knowledge, both within the individual and, from man's perspective at least, absolutely. If teaching others what is at present known carries the importance our commitment presumes, then even more important in a final evaluation must be the creation of new knowledge to be taught. Teaching others the known processes by which to measure temperature on the stars carries its own high significance. But discovering a new and simpler and more accurate method of measuring gives to the teaching a sounder authority and proves the validity of the learning process itself.

And more so with the creative arts. Probably my own handful of poems will never be ultimately significant. But unquestionably for me, the writing of them has been the most significant single fact in my own capacity to teach literature. For them to fulfill a meaningful destiny as something to be "known" by others, however, they must carry their own load as created fact, they must be good — good enough to invite others to know them. Should they happen to be that good, again the process of education will have achieved a kind of ultimate end: not merely the transmission of what is already known, but the creation of something new to be known.

The Mormon commitment also implies that the Church should think of

itself not simply as defending itself against the possible effects of secular education, but as accepting and welcoming part of the national burden of university education — accepting as burden, if we must, but welcoming as opportunity. For only by involving itself in education can the Church make felt the deep vitality of its commitment.

Even if we define and accept secular education as the enemy (I hope we never do), we should take a lesson from my Hobbit friends, who discovered — as have so many others before and since — the real facts about defense and offense. They carried the battle into the heart of enemy territory. To be sure, they were forced to by the nature of the ring: it had to be destroyed; it could only be destroyed by their dropping it into the flames of Mt. Doom. But I suspect that we are similarly forced by the very nature of education. We might be able to retire into our spiritual fortress. But to do so would leave the “field” of education to the enemy.

All this, however, is much too negative. The Mormon commitment to education implies the responsibility of the Church’s educational system to develop men capable of representing the Church in the world of ideas — all kinds of ideas — and of creativity, just as its leaders now represent it in the worlds of business and religion. No concept of sheltered education can suffice if we are to develop such men. The world may respect us for our moral and spiritual standards, but it respects our ideas and creativity only as they successfully compete in the open market.

Even with some improvement in the last few years, we must say, if we face the problem honestly, that measured by the support given to graduate programs and to research and creativity — where the commitment to education ought to show up most strongly because less tainted with “practical” considerations — we have at best made haste only with due deliberation. To put all this differently, the Mormon scholar needs to be able to bring all his insights, especially his particularly Mormon insights, to bear on significant problems both timeless and of our time — to be able to do so under the immediate auspices of the Church and its university and to feel that the Church supports him in his work, not made to feel that he is somehow involved in subversive activities. He should be able to feel such support even if no immediate relation is apparent between what he is doing and the apparent interests of the Church. Even, I would go so far, if the work seems inimical to apparent and immediate interests of the Church. For I believe intensely that no meaningful truth and no sincere and energetic quest for truth can be really inimical to the final best interests of the Church.

Which brings me to the final implication I wish to explore, one that includes and absorbs all the others. The Mormon commitment to education implies — and grows out of — an absolute commitment to human freedom. Few Mormons but would approve here. But I have in mind something quite different, I fear, from the usual ideal. I want to insist on freedom as a dynamic and creative force, not merely a right we struggle to protect — though of course it has to be that too. I insist on a definition of freedom as not simply the right or even the possibility but the *capacity* to make meaningful choices. For capacity has to do with awareness — awareness of possible alternatives and of their implications. And awareness is directly related to education. One could almost define the process of education, formal or otherwise, as the increasing awareness of

alternatives. The size of my record collection may limit my choice of what to hear, but only musical knowledge and taste, both products of education, can help me choose meaningfully what I add to it or what I listen to from it. Only by knowing and studying the alternatives could the Ents and the Hobbits make their choices. And only by our broad awareness of alternatives can our religious decisions be finally either as wise or as meaningful as they should be.

Conceived thus, freedom itself is dynamic and self-expanding, just as education and creativity are. Those decisions that really tax and expand us seldom present simple choices between neat categories of right and wrong, good and bad, black and white. Nor do they often present themselves in neat categories as moral or ethical or religious or practical or professional. They tend to involve choices between two or more goods, forced choices between two or more bads. The practical and professional get involved with the moral and ethical and spiritual. And even where a moral absolute might be involved — in the choice between, say, absolute honesty in a business deal and a slightly shady deal that would save the business and give work to many — even in such a choice the alternative may be not merely temptation, but itself a positive, practical and even moral good. Such choices need the best preparation we can get in awareness of alternatives and their implications. The making of such choices increases our capacity to make choices, assuming of course that we make them broadly aware of what we do. That is, freedom is dynamic and self-expanding. To the extent that we exercise it meaningfully we develop greater capacity to exercise it. Or to put it differently, freedom in its most meaningful sense is internal not external, dynamic not static, qualitative certainly but also quantitative not so much in the number of freedoms we *have* as in our capacity to exercise freedom.

If I am right in conceiving freedom thus highly and complexly, it follows that an education which promotes freedom may not always produce tractable, unquestioning Mormons with a simple faith who fit neatly into the Church's programs. It can and often does produce the questioner, the thoughtful dissenter, the "intellectual." *Can* produce these, but usually does not, at least not if I can trust my own sensitivity to such things among the educated Mormons I know best. Though many question and dissent, most tend to accept, fit in, or at least go along with — thoughtfully and aware, I would hope, but also tractable and cooperative. Regardless, I have trouble seeing the dissenter, educated or not, as the enemy. Dissent makes us examine our positions and activities. If really sound they should survive such examination and emerge the stronger.

No, the Mormon commitment to education implies nothing timid or defensive. Rather it implies a vision of the Church's educational system and especially the Church's university as a major force in helping to lead its individual members and the Church itself toward their highest destiny. The stone cut from the mountain may roll forth and fill the whole earth. But such a trope implies a stone inwardly vital, inwardly self-creating, inwardly self-expanding — as I have described creativity and education and freedom to be.

I am only too aware that much of what I am saying can be read as "intellectualism" rampant. I must accept the risk. I think it one of the saddest ironies of intellectual and spiritual history that the term has been poisoned semantically. That our finest minds must see themselves stigmatized. That one of my finest students should find himself reproached by his counselor, himself a Ph.D.,



as an intellectual. As with the learning of man so with the intellect of man, when it conflicts with God's knowledge or God's will or man's spirituality or even simple human humility, it can lead man astray. But finally I refuse the dichotomy. Intellect and spirit may somehow be separate entities within us. They are certainly words to describe differing and sometimes opposing experiences or activities. But I refuse the usual picture of them as in fundamental conflict. I refuse it on empirical grounds because I cannot find the dichotomy in my own experience of either the spiritual or the intellectual. My most significant experiences have involved such a fusing of the spiritual, the artistic, the intellectual, even the physical, that no dissecting could separate them. I refuse it on religious grounds because I have to believe in the organic integrity of God's highest creation. Man is, or can be and strives to be, *one*. One with himself and, through the atonement, one with God. And one not merely by denying the body or the intellect or the will in favor of the soul or the spirit. All these can and must work together in the highest service of man — and of God. At least this much is implied in our commonly proclaimed goal in education: "the whole man."

I close with a comment about the crime of destroying a student's testimony. I would certainly see destroying a testimony as a crime, if for no other reason than that a testimony is so personal and precious that destroying it would involve the violation of the sanctity of the human soul: the greatest of crimes for Hawthorne and James and so many others. But I would also argue that no one, not even a sinister college professor, can really destroy anyone's testimony — anyone's but his own, that is. Just as nobody can *give* me a testimony, so nobody can destroy the one I have. Others can challenge it, I can lose it through inaction or lack of concern, I can throw it away, I can refuse it. But nobody out there can destroy it. Not if it comes from whence we say it comes and is what we say it is. Whatever else, it is a uniquely personal thing. I would even argue that the real crime, the one we stand in greater danger of, would be to leave one's testimony simply intact and untouched, to present an education neatly wrapped and insulated from one's testimony — or to permit one to keep his testimony isolated and insulated. If a testimony is something to bundle up and hide in our briefcases for fear of its being touched, then it is indeed most static and most vulnerable, and we do right to simply protect it. But surely a testimony, like education and freedom and creativity, is self-creative, is inwardly dynamic and alive, is something to be invested like talents. No hot-house plant, it needs exposure to wind and rain and cold to give it toughness and endurance. It too responds to opposition in all things. It is not meant for a static life — if such a thing were possible. Only the Ents, after having done battle, can go back to a static life. And even for them it meant eventual death, as the destruction of the Ring eventually meant death to all the wondrous, magical creatures of Middle Earth. Only man survived as Middle Earth evolved into modern earth. If Tolkien had been writing Mormon cosmology, surely he would have had to say that man survived because for man the quest can never end. Man once exposed to knowledge, once having eaten the apple, is man committed to the quest. He may destroy himself along the way. But this chance is the price he pays for the privilege of being human, even for the privilege of life. Mormons pay it willingly, knowing that with the dangers come also the significance and joy of coming to know.