

Living with Opposition in All Things

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IN A RECENT ISSUE of *Dialogue*, Clifton Jolley described the personal essay as a good way to confront the "beast." I usually confront the beast in the shower. It is not that it lurks there more than anywhere else, but the hot water beating on my back soothes my body and clears my mind so that I can examine dilemmas with a lucidity unmatched—except in the sauna. So over the years I have written dozens of personal essays (and hundreds of letters to the editor) in the shower. Although few of these have been transcribed onto paper, my wasting of water has been beneficial. I have maintained my sanity, I am still in the Church, and I occasionally have an interesting thought to add to a conversation. But ideas and feelings need to be shared, and sometimes even personal sharing with friends is not enough—they finally need to be written.

My excuse for committing to writing my struggles with Mormon paradoxes came from a meeting of the Society for Values in Higher Education. I prepared a paper for a session on struggling with religious traditions. Writing for a non-Mormon audience forced me to spend some time analyzing Mormonism so I could provide a context for my dilemmas. I described Mormonism as a synthesis of religious traditions (an idea I stole from Jan Shipps), pointing out how it combines a strong Semitic identification and a vision of Christian primitivism with the early American experience (and later with the secularization of modern middle-class America).

Through this analysis, I realized that Mormonism, for me, is simultaneously beautiful and a source of conflict and paradox, and so I decided that the scriptural "opposition in all things" includes the opposition I find within my Mormon tradition and within myself. Mormonism's rich religious heritage invites creative exploration, but this is discouraged by an institutional need for orthodoxy and conformity. This strain makes the process very difficult, but in examining my Mormon heritage, I found a role model for my

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explorations—Joseph Smith. The Prophet Joseph creatively manipulated the religious traditions incorporated within Mormonism to justify his unorthodox views on traditional Christianity. When confronted with some of the paradoxes of Mormonism, I justify my own unorthodox views through similar manipulation of my religious tradition.

One of these paradoxes is the Church's response to the contemporary feminist movement. The Church hierarchy is generally opposed to feminist positions, but by the time this attitude has filtered down to the local level, it sometimes becomes a dogmatic—and I think irresponsible—militancy, as with some of the International Women's Year meetings. As one who was found working with "the followers of Satan" at an IWY meeting, I tasted first hand the enmity of the Saints. This reaction within the Church makes it difficult to be a Mormon feminist. To deal with the apparent paradox of being a Mormon and a feminist, I have turned to my Mormon heritage for justification—just what many other Mormon feminists have done.

This process can be seen in *Exponent II*, the *Dialogue* issue on women, books like *Mormon Sisters* and *Sister Saints*, and in study groups springing up throughout Zion. By turning to the past, we have discovered a rich legacy of feminism within Mormon history, with role models of active, liberated women, successful in medicine, law, commerce, education, publishing and politics, and speaking out in favor of many feminist views of the day. This is very useful to those of us who are trying to reconcile our feminist views with a culture antagonistic to those values. There is a danger, however, that we will end up painting a glorified picture of our liberated foremothers which is just as distorted as the glorified homemaker image. We do not need to show that the Church was not sexist in the nineteenth century or that all Mormon women were liberated. That would not be true. The important lesson is that it was possible to be a Mormon woman and more than a housewife. Now we need to focus on contemporary role models to show that this still is possible.

The emphasis on the cultural past was a necessary stage, but I have found in my personal past another explanation for my feminism. I used to try to explain why I am a feminist in spite of being a Mormon; I now claim that I am a feminist *because* I am a Mormon. My Mormon upbringing prepared me to accept feminist values. This first became clear to me a few years ago when I took an airplane trip to my sister's wedding.

I had been asked by our local women's center to participate in a panel discussion on *The Liberated Man* by Warren Farrell, so I had the book with me. In my traditional family, it was soon noticed and I had been challenged by my brother-in-law who asked whether or not I really agreed with such ideas. I presented him with Farrell's list of traditional masculine values—power, aggression, adventure and sexual exploitation—and compared these to his list of traditional feminine values—gentleness, concern for others, good family life and tender caring. I asked him which set of values was closer to Mormon values, the traditional masculine or the traditional feminine. He had to admit that traditional masculine values do not agree with Mormon values and that we ought to liberate ourselves from them.

As I made my point (my brother-in-law is a judge), I realized that I had not been raised to value the traditional male way of being. Although my Mormon culture had taught me to value the traditional patriarchal role and the leadership and authority roles, it did not teach me to value the traditional male personality. I had been raised to be gentle and kind, loving and patient. This also meant that I was taught not to be sexually exploitative and not to try to prove my manliness through aggression or vulgarity. Here is the paradox of my Mormon background, then: it gave me a sexist ideology but a feminist personality. With the two in conflict, personality easily wins. I find that I like feminists but have little in common with traditionally masculine males. And feminists like me. Some talk of the need for men to change in response to women's liberation, but I did not change—I merely discovered a viewpoint that values what I already value; and I found people who value me the way I already am. Religious dogma and social and political ideology are no match for personality structure, basic values and friendships. Just as I find in Mormon history a cultural heritage to justify my feminism, so I find in my history a personal heritage to explain it.

In addition to Mormonism's past and my own past, I find confirmation of my feminism in the present. My trip to Utah for my sister's wedding made me aware of several aspects of my sex role behavior—how it felt and how it affected others. I have always been so involved in caring for our children that it seemed natural to take my ten-month-old son with me to Utah. The whole family could not afford to go, but he could fly for free. I was amazed at the reactions. Everyone was so impressed. I was so brave and daring (and a little bit foolhardy) to risk such a venture on my own. Only later did I realize that this reaction was an unintentional insult to me. No one was surprised or impressed when my wife, Ann, took our two girls to California for her sister's wedding, but they expect me to be helpless with one child. (I also resent the implication that I cannot cook or take care of the children—or even myself—which is inherent in the Relief Society battle plan whenever Ann is sick or away from home. Why not bring food for *her* when I am away?) The most surprised person seemed to be the man at the check-in counter of the Salt Lake Airport who kept asking me where the rest of my party was.

I must admit that I was a bit surprised when I called the flight attendant to ask for a spoon because I was ready to feed the baby and a man appeared and offered to heat the food for me. That is an image in which I still take delight: a male flight attendant warming a bottle so a father can feed his baby. There are other images not so pleasant, such as changing the baby's diaper on a metal bench in the middle of a crowded corridor in Chicago's O'Hare Airport. There is no good place in an airport for a man to change a diaper (the same is true of our church buildings—I always have to change the diaper on the landing leading to the stage).

The nicest memory of that trip is the bonding between me and my son. That concentrated dose of togetherness and primary caretaking produced a lasting closeness that I value. In priesthood meeting we sometimes talk about how important it is for a mother to care for her children and what joy that

brings. If we men really took that seriously, we would fight to be equal partners in that joyful process. I value it enough to do it; in fact, I think I want Ann to work so I will have an excuse to stay home with the children. I would go crazy, however, if I had to do it all the time (and housework is a different story altogether; the best that can be said of it is that it is barely tolerable when it is shared). I find it disconcerting that while the brethren in priesthood meeting are aware that their wives are going crazy and feel sorry for them, they still insist that wives must stay home because that is what the Church teaches—end of discussion! Not only did my Mormon background prepare me to be a feminist, but my experience as a father convinces me that a feminist is what I ought to be.

I have faced similar conflicts in my attempts to be a Mormon and a humanistic psychologist. Although the two roles often seem incompatible, I am humanistic *because* of my Mormon heritage. In the field of psychology, the paradoxes of the Mormon Zeitgeist make for some strange theoretical bedfellows because of the overriding importance of free agency. The idea that we are free to choose is central not only to Mormon theology, but also to our social and political philosophy and our moral exhortations. Of the three basic schools of thought in psychology, only humanism posits free will, and therefore, by default, many Mormons are attracted to humanistic psychology. But there is a problem here because the humanistic value system is at variance with the fundamentalism of modern Mormonism.

An example of the ambivalence this causes occurred last year when Rollo May was invited to visit Brigham Young University. He had been invited, and was given a warm reception, because he is a leading advocate of free will. He noted, however, that he was disappointed in his audience, saying, "You as an audience are a little too obedient, and I do not feel as though I have been challenged by your questions." A psychologist at BYU responded that the reaction stemmed from the natural courtesy of the students and from an epistemology differing from May's. Truth is discovered not by questioning a humanistic psychologist or trading ideas with one but by revelation from God. Students at BYU are to listen respectfully (i.e., passively) to worldly ideas and then accept or reject them depending upon how closely these ideas conform with revealed truth.

I became converted to humanistic psychology at BYU. Not only did the free agency issue steer me in that direction, but Abraham Maslow's concept of self-actualization sounded compatible with the Mormon version of perfectionism. It was also at BYU that I was introduced to the human potential movement through an encounter group. In graduate school, my humanistic orientation became more sophisticated and more clearly defined; my value system converged with humanistic philosophy, and I received training as a leader of encounter groups. Although all of this increased my distance from Mormon orthodoxy, the changes in my thinking were subtle and natural, and they seemed to flow from my Mormon background.

My acceptance of humanistic psychology was helped by an inclination toward subjective ways of knowing which grew out of my contact with

personal revelation. Humanistic psychology also values experiential knowledge, but this similarity leads to a paradox because what I have experienced subjectively in my work does not fit well with Mormon orthodoxy. Yet if subjective experience is a legitimate (but not ultimate) basis for my religious knowledge and conviction, how can I deny it in other contexts? Such experience is not the primary criterion for what I believe, but my Mormon background teaches me not to ignore it, and I refuse to deny what I have experienced both within and outside of the Church—even when they conflict. And even the conflict should not surprise me because Mormonism and humanistic psychology agree that there must be opposition in all things.

It would take an entire issue of *Dialogue* to discuss all of the paradoxes that I have come to accept, but the ultimate one may be the expectation that Mormons are supposed to be “in the world but not of the world.” This injunction creates an overriding ambivalence about practically everything. We should be blessed with riches but not be materialistic. We are supposed to enjoy life but not too much. Our theology exalts the body, but the flesh is suspect. We are to experience joy but not too much pleasure. We need to know good and evil through experience but never do anything wrong. I think that we really have not solved the puzzle of being in the world but not of it. I know that I have not. At BYU, it seemed that not being of the world meant being five years behind it, but somehow I do not think that is what God has in mind.

When I was in graduate school, I was part of a Mormon community with an academic orientation. I associated with others who were dealing with similar paradoxes and conflicts, and I was comfortable in the ward. As I began my career, however, I moved into a ward in which I was the only academic—a ward where the fundamentalist extreme was the norm. It soon became apparent how far I had drifted from the orthodox position. The connection between this drift and my academic orientation as a humanistic psychologist became clear to me when I used the Personal Orientation Inventory (POI) in teaching a personality research course.

The POI is a personality test designed by Everett Shostrom to measure the degree of self-actualization as described by Maslow. I first analyzed it (and analyzed myself with it) in a graduate seminar. I was a little chagrined to find myself only partially actualized. The second time around, however, I knew how to take the test, and so I produced for myself the beautiful profile of an actualizing person. This time I also analyzed the test in depth and discovered that what it really was testing was agreement with the value-laden assumptions of humanistic psychology. My improved scores were not due to my ability to fake a test nor to my status as a better person. They reflected a change in my attitudes, a change that brought me closer to humanistic psychology. That this change was related to my Mormon background was confirmed by the nonactualized profile of one of my students who happened to be a Mormon. When I examined his responses, it was clear that he scored low because his answers were consistent with typical Mormon expectations. It was obvious that Mormon society and humanistic psychology define the

optimal way to fulfill human potential in very different terms. Humanistic psychology's self-actualization involves self-acceptance and self-determination; whereas the Mormon version of perfection involves perfect obedience. Concepts which, as an undergraduate, I had seen as equivalent turned out to be defined as opposites.

The result of these paradoxes is that today I find myself in a bind. I am perceived by myself and by others as a marginal Mormon because I question some positions of the Church and openly disagree with others. My disagreements with the Church are based in large part upon my professional or academic experience, which in turn is deeply rooted in my Mormon heritage. Stated in another way, my Mormon background (both my personal history and my view of Mormon history and theology) strongly influenced my academic orientation, an orientation that causes me to question my current Mormon culture. My response has been to call upon my heritage (my past and Mormonism's past) to understand, explain and justify my present.

I do not think that what I have described is unique. I think all of us are scientist/philosophers, trying to make sense out of this crazy life. When the world view we have created is not adequate to explain what is happening, we redefine it. Sometimes we redefine the present to fit the past; sometimes we reinterpret the past to fit the present. Individuals do this; institutions do it; societies do it. There are problems in this process. I am aware that I distort the past. I sometimes say that I was born in the wrong century. If only I had lived in the days of the Prophet Joseph, I would have fit in. But in more lucid moments I know that is not true. I would have had as much or more trouble accepting Joseph's demand of unquestioning support and obedience as I have accepting the Church's current pressure for conformity. But still, I suggest that it is psychologically sound to reinterpret, or selectively remember the past in such a way that helps us to adequately deal with the present. And I would argue that this is preferable to redefining, or selectively perceiving, the present in order to maintain a past that may no longer be useful. I think we ought to exploit our religious heritage—the myths, the history, the rituals, the traditions and the philosophy—in a way that clarifies the meaningfulness of life in the present.

A few of us from the Society for Values in Higher Education group have continued to meet at the University of Chicago to explore more deeply the nature of our religious commitment and its dilemmas. I have become aware that what all of us are doing is attempting to define the essence of our religious traditions by distinguishing between the essential and the tangential. I have discovered that I am incorrigibly Mormon. What must I accept, then, to maintain my Mormon identity? I have struggled with this for many years; I even plotted out different levels of doctrinal necessity. Joseph F. Smith defined the essential Mormon doctrine as acceptance of God as the Father, Christ as the Savior and Joseph Smith as a prophet. I have conservatively defined the essential behavioral code as that which is necessary to maintain a current temple recommend. But for me, the essence of my Mormonism is the doctrine of eternalism as spelled out by Joseph Smith toward

the end of his life. By this I mean that even if I were to leave the Church, I cannot imagine changing my concept of myself as an eternally existent (backwards and forwards) being. I do not know for a certainty that my version of eternity is accurate, but I strongly affirm that my conception is the way it ought to be, and I do not think I could accept another vision. Because among Christian religions, this doctrine is unique, a Mormon is the only thing I could ever be.

What I have written about my experience as a Mormon may be described by some as mere rationalization—the attempt of one who has strayed to justify his sinful ways. On the other hand, some of my non-Mormon colleagues think it is a stubborn refusal to let go of a tradition that causes me much conflict. As I see it, I have three alternatives: I can throw away my Mormon heritage (rejecting my personal history and breaking family ties); I can recant my heresy, and repent (giving up my academic and personal integrity); or I can continue to search my Mormon tradition for ways to define myself as a committed Mormon while maintaining the right to make my own resolutions of the paradoxes of Mormon life. For me, the first two alternatives are unacceptable. They require denying my experience—experience which I value. I therefore choose to live with the contradictions of the third.

