

# NOTES AND COMMENTS

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## *The Obsessive-Compulsive Mormon*

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IN GUATEMALA I saw Indians sitting by the side of the road dangling their feet over a cliff as they stared across the valley to the mountains beyond. The guide told me they often sat quietly for hours watching the play of light and shadows on those beautiful mountains. In contrast, many of us pursue a life-style characteristic of the obsessive-compulsive personality, a common trait among many church members and one that is actually encouraged by its teachings. Although we are each a unique blend of our own qualities and experiences, we show order in our development as well, an order patterned in recurrent constellations of traits. The Church actively fosters traits of industry and activity, the wise use of time, restraint of aggression and compulsive performance of duty. These are the hallmarks of the obsessive-compulsive personality. The benefits to self and others are obvious, but these same traits can cripple major parts of the personality, particularly those used in relationships with others.

One young, unmarried Mormon woman I knew felt compelled to fill her life with constructive activities. Not only did she work at a demanding full-time job, but she attended night school, was active in several church jobs and in a voluntary community organization. Though she tried to meet the needs of her family and friends, they could rarely catch up with her, and she was often too tired to be emotionally available. She felt guilty and "selfish" as she sat through her classes. When she set time aside for people, she felt as if she were wasting her time. When she tried to evaluate her dilemma in the light of church teachings, she felt confused because most of her efforts seemed actually fostered by the Church.

A couple entered therapy because, though both were fine church members, they were unhappy in their marriage. The wife was a very hard worker who felt her efforts unappreciated. Her husband perceived her as dictatorial, and though he tried to anticipate her wishes, he could not please her unless she herself had assigned him the task and thus become his "boss." He viewed her as rigid and critical in dealing with their children, while she felt he did not

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sympathize with her load of anxiety and guilt. It became obvious that the teachings of the Church cannot banish personality problems; they can only offer a program for achieving maturity.

A friend who was recently called as a counselor in the bishopric in his ward felt both happy and anxious. He was the father of five children all under the age of eight, an executive in a demanding job, and he was attending night school to obtain an MBA. He often traveled on behalf of his company. His wife had already been feeling lonely and overburdened, but both felt they would be blessed if he accepted this calling. Both wondered, however, how they could have time and energy for their relationship and how the children would fare with so little contact with their father. This is a common problem among active members, and some men do feel that their families suffer. It presents a conflict because the Church teaches us that our families come first.

The thread uniting these stories is the obsessive-compulsive personality, one who tends to be conscientious, orderly, perfectionistic, meticulous, frugal, punctual, often stubborn or even rigid. His need for sameness and order in his environment brings him peace and a sense of security, predictability and control. He has a tendency to hoard things and a strict conscience that is often a harsh judge of himself and others. His emotions are so well-controlled most of the time that he is not easily provoked to anger, but when he is, he is likely to feel shame. Emotion tends to be suppressed and replaced by thoughts, that is, so intellectualized that it remains unexperienced. His self-esteem is so linked to his work that he feels good about himself only when he is productive. His self-esteem is generally low because he would like to be perfect but can rarely achieve perfection.

These traits may also appear at the opposite end of the spectrum. A person may be messy, habitually late, compulsively generous and disorganized. Often a person will shift between extremes. There is a wide spectrum of these traits, healthy, and socially useful at one end, severely crippling at the other.

Because these patterns are usually developed through identification with parents, they become the stable core of the personality. Their roots lie in the earliest years of childhood when one is asked to surrender his unabashed freedom in favor of control of his body (toilet training) and impulses (socialization). This control eventually becomes internal, but initially, of course, it is imposed by society, especially the parents, and is resisted by the child with his stubborn "No." The internalization of control coincides with the child's wonderful, active mastery of motor tasks which is a solid source of self-esteem. These two factors—the need for control and the joy of the successfully completed task—form the core of the obsessive-compulsive personality.

Control is a quality highly prized in the Mormon culture—control of temper, appetite, sexual impulses, time. But there can be too much of a good thing, both in controlling oneself and others. A mother once accused her twenty-two-year-old son of being ungrateful and sullen because he showed no gratitude when she painstakingly cleaned his room and washed all his clothes, not realizing that from his point of view she had invaded his privacy and made him feel guilty about his chosen life-style—messiness! Another

woman exploded in anger because her husband constantly told her what she *should* do, think, feel, without regard for her own autonomy. A father reported that he was so concerned about his fifteen-year-old daughter's budding sexuality that he listened in on her phone conversations, read her diary, checked her personal belongings for contraceptives and set very strict limits on her activities.

The price of noncompliance with the wishes of the controller is often rejection and loss of love. But people feel angry and oppositional when someone tries to control them: to impose strict rules, to deprive them of choice, to intrude upon their privacy, telling them what they "should" be, think, or feel. Such control chafes unbearably over time. It smolders sullenly between husband and wife, sulks in passive-aggressive opposition, or explodes into defiant behavior in teenagers. A major cause of malfunction in families, it is difficult to treat because the person at fault often elevates his behavior into a virtue. He is unable to see himself through the eyes of others; he can see only that his good intentions are being attacked.

To help an overcontrolling person, one must understand the purpose of the behavior. On the simplest level, it serves mastery by reversal: A child who is under the control of a powerful parent often feels helpless and humiliated in the face of adult control. As he grows, he avoids the passive position of the one who is controlled and identifies with the active controller. The control that an obsessive-compulsive person exercises over himself and others, however, is more complex than this identification. Such people often appear formal, intellectual, unemotional and ill at ease in social contacts. Their responses are constricted by anxiety and the defenses they erect against that anxiety.

We all have to deal with anxiety. Where does it come from? From the parts of us that seem unacceptable in the orderly, adult world. Rampant impulses of sexuality, aggression and messiness must be tamed and suppressed. Feelings that arise in the course of most relationships cannot be given free expression if we expect to manage long-term relationships. But impulses and feelings continue to live their gleeful, intense lives outside our awareness, pressing for audience in our conscious minds, an audience denied them by our defenses.

What are the defenses an obsessive-compulsive person uses? The very qualities that we usually admire are really defenses against anxiety, ways of controlling in oneself or another that which makes us anxious. The major ones are isolation, intellectualization, projection and reaction formation.

*Isolation* is the ability to split off and repress the emotional content of a thought so that only the intellectual content remains conscious. Feelings are harder to control than thoughts and they cause more trouble, but they also lend humanity and color. Without them, the obsessive-compulsive person can seem distant, stilted, artificial and unempathic. For example, a loved child goes off to college. The mother weeps, telling the child all her feelings for him, while the father remains unmoved, prepared for the experience by the *knowledge* that all children grow up and go away. He and the child have been

robbed of an opportunity for a real exchange of feeling. This defense has been elevated into a stereotypical virtue of acceptable male behavior in our culture.

*Intellectualization* is a propensity for philosophical rumination or abstract thinking rather than its direct expression. Rather than addressing her anger at her son who was pursuing a "hippy" life-style, a woman spent an hour in therapy discussing the breakdown of morals in the late 1960's and her theories of the effect this was having on the next generation, including efforts schools and courts should be making to control the problem. She needed to examine her own efforts to control her son by inflexible rules.

*Projection* refers to the unconscious displacement of thoughts, feelings or behavior from oneself onto another. The projected material is unacceptable when viewed as part of oneself since it is often sexual or aggressive. For example, a family brought their five-year-old son for treatment because he was disobedient, defiant and messy. The father was an obsessive-compulsive man who had difficulty controlling his own temper. His view of the child as a messy, angry little one in need of strict control represented a rejected part of himself. He had projected it onto a convenient target who could in turn be controlled. When the focus was shifted to his own problems, he loosened his control of his son, began to acknowledge the boy's good points and found that his son's behavior had become acceptable.

*Reaction formation* occurs when a person feels one thing but expresses its opposite. For example, if he were unconsciously angry with someone, he might feel compelled to go out of his way to be especially kind. This would be ideal except that such behavior often strikes the observer as "phony." Sometimes the true nature of the underlying impulse reveals itself. A woman was intensely angry with her eighteen-year-old daughter whom she correctly perceived as competing fiercely for the father's affection and attention. This mother could not allow herself to acknowledge the intensity of her rage at her daughter, whom she loved very much. Instead she imagined dreadful and unlikely harm that might befall her daughter and then tried mightily to protect her. As a result, the daughter was leading an overprotected, controlled and constricted life under her mother's watchful eye. The mother's hostility, expressed through reaction formation as an exaggerated concern for her daughter's well-being, acted therefore as a punishment for the girl.

Although these defenses are effective in dealing with all feelings, they are particularly effective in battling anger, that frightening emotion so repudiated in our culture. Anger can hurt others and can cause shameful loss of control. But if not expressed, it can impoverish communication, understanding and closeness in intimate relationships. The injunctions against anger in the scriptures are aimed at those who deliberately provoke others to anger or who are unable to forgive when anger is aroused. The scriptures do not attack those who *feel* anger because anger is a universal human feeling. We are admonished to master its expression, to find the appropriate medium between explosion and repression. The decision to consciously suppress, postpone or modify the expression of anger is different from the unconscious repression of anger through isolation, intellectualization and reaction-formation. These de-

fenses lend a distant, mechanical or unreal quality to their possessor. This is particularly important to the obsessive-compulsive person because he has much anger, conscious or not, usually involving interpersonal issues of control and will.

When anger ceases to be experienced as overwhelming, evil or destructive, the road lies open for its more mature expression. This transformation is usually accomplished through the medium of a close relationship in which we are accepted for ourselves, helped to express our feelings and aided in curbing their destructive effects. It requires a willingness to become vulnerable through intimacy and self-revelation.

Intimacy itself can be anxiety-provoking, however, and so the defenses previously mentioned can be used to defend against loving feelings as well. Closeness to another may threaten one's sense of self. Can we be swallowed by another's more powerful identity? Closeness requires disclosure of emotions which we might rather keep secret, entails responsibility for and dependency on another and carries with it the dreadful possibility of losing that which one loves. The whirlwind of activity that envelops the obsessive-compulsive person allows him to remain calm at its center, thereby avoiding intimacy.

If self-control is highly prized in our Church culture, activity may be even more prized. Consider the pejorative phrase, "inactive member." Activity is encouraged through church assignments and meetings and is paralleled by myriad injunctions: Keep a journal, grow a garden, be physically fit, compile a genealogical record, read the scriptures and other good works, volunteer in the community, involve oneself in family, develop one's creative talents, keep one's home and grounds in good order, be a good neighbor and a good citizen. An activity-oriented life has become a hallmark of our Church culture and an extrapolation of the gospel principle that this is a probationary state we must use wisely.

Of course, activity experienced as the successful mastery of a task and performance of duty is a solid source of pleasure and self-esteem, but as with control there can be too much of a good thing. I have heard women in my Relief Society classes moan that they feel guilty if they are not busy. "I feel so anxious all the time. I feel I'm not doing enough, that I'm not good enough. I'm constantly busy and can never relax." Activity has shifted from the vehicle of mastery and self-esteem to the driver in charge of one's life. The compulsive nature of the activity indicates that, like excessive control of oneself and others, it defends against anxiety. It also serves to defend against depression. If a person can fill every moment with some activity, he will not feel anxious, depressed, or empty. But the temporary nature of the solution is apparent during a lull when these feelings come flooding back.

The defensive nature of such business is sensed by others. Even though the person may feel that his activity is on behalf of others, it comes across as a duty performed rather than an act of intimate relatedness. I had a succession of visiting teachers who reminded me of Mary and Martha. One was reliable, punctual, task-oriented and invariably brief in her visit. I was grateful for her

reliability, but since we shared few of our feelings, our relationship remained formal. Another came to be my friend, and we remain so even though her assignment has ended. Martha, busy with the cares of the world, gave important service. But Mary was giving something more profound and lasting—herself.

One man reflected sadly about his relationship with his father who had been raised an orphan in the unkind home of a relative and had run off at an early age to make his way in the world. His father was a nervous, restless man who could not sit still but whose constant activity often benefited others. He complained that his father was unable to listen and would leave the room, turn on the TV or interrupt with unrelated remarks. The father was limited in his ability to tolerate intimacy, and the son could see that his acts of kindness were also pleas that others think well of him, something he was not able to do for himself.

An attractive, middle-aged woman in the Church recently commented that she really enjoyed being busy and active because it made her feel she had accomplished something worthwhile. Another woman in therapy, expanding this statement through her own reflections, realized that she felt worthwhile only when she was busy. She felt she could not even afford to “waste time” in the evenings by sitting quietly with her husband. She felt anxious at such times, also concerned because he complained that they never talked intimately. Since it took him a while to move from trivia to deeper subjects, her activity destroyed all possibility of this intimacy.

As this woman continued her work in therapy, she revealed a demanding and critical conscience. Often critical of other people, she was more critical of herself. Her performance was never quite good enough: she was never sensitive enough of others. Tears filled her eyes as she produced painful self-accusations. She suffered frequent depressions because her ideals were so high that she could never live up to them. As the daughter of a critical, rejecting father and a mother with very low self-esteem whose only role in life was to lose herself in service to her family, she realized that she had identified with her mother and had internalized her father’s voice as her conscience. She also felt that her state of mind was consistent with the teachings of the gospel. Aren’t we here to achieve perfection, to improve step by step, to ceaselessly evaluate faults?

Her ruminations are a common part of the obsessive-compulsive picture. The conscience is in the driver’s seat of pressured activity. We have been reminded by Neal Maxwell:

Some of us who would not chastise a neighbor for his frailties have a field day with our own. Some of us stand before no more harsh a judge than ourselves, a judge who stubbornly refuses to admit much happy evidence and who cares nothing for due process. Fortunately, the Lord loves us more than we love ourselves.<sup>1</sup>

As this woman proceeded with therapy, she became less critical of herself. She began to see her worth as an individual, quite aside from the worth of her productions. This was possible because she was valued and accepted in the

therapist-patient relationship in a way her parents had been unable to offer. She became more able to set limits on the requests of others. As occurs with so many good church members, she felt guilty if she ever said "No." Her self-esteem had depended on how others viewed her, so it was important to please everyone. As her conscience became less biting and her self-esteem rose, she set a more reasonable pace for her activities. She was less tired and irritable and more available to others, better able to give loving service. She could pray better because her efforts to concentrate were no longer blocked by obsessive ruminations about her activities.

The Church encourages obsessive-compulsive traits and some of these work well in promoting righteousness. A faithful and conscientious member will attend all his meetings, pay his tithing, fast, read the scriptures, pray, perform his jobs responsibly, do all things asked of him. In conforming his behavior, he will find his inward state in accord as well. Others, however, will feel incomplete and mechanical, sensing an inner emptiness. For some, this is secondary to the rational nature of the obsessive-compulsive that can be at odds with a spiritual attitude. For others it is due to the impoverished nature of interpersonal contact in an overextended lifestyle. For still others it is a failure to achieve real feeling to accompany the ritual. Whatever the cause, it is useful to gain some understanding of the obsessive-compulsive traits within oneself as a prelude to making changes that allow for intimacy.

To those numbed by ceaseless activities I would say:

Never, never teach virtue . . . you will walk in danger, beware! beware!  
 Every man knows how useful it is to be useful.  
 No one seems to know how useful it is to be useless.  
 Chuang-Tzu

The solution does not lie in discarding obsessive-compulsive traits, an impossible task anyway. It is possible, however, for an obsessive-compulsive person to see himself more clearly. With some understanding of himself he can become more comfortable with feelings, particularly anger and love, become less controlling, alter the priorities in life to allow for intimacy and achieve self-acceptance.

Lael J. Woodbury has said:

But the Lord, perceiving time as space, sees us as we are, not as we are becoming. We are continually before him—the totality of our psyches, personalities, bodies, lives, and behaviors. Life becomes, then, not a cumulative, additive process, one in which we layer on increments of perfection like successive coats of lacquer. Life is rather a challenge to discover who we are.

Perhaps the Guatemalan Indians were in pursuit of this discovery as they meditated in the clear air of the mountains.

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<sup>1</sup>Neal Maxwell, "Notwithstanding My Weaknesses" *Ensign* Nov. 1976 p. 13