

Top Kingdom: The Mormon Race for the Celestial Gates

Donlu DeWitt Thayer

IT WAS A SATURDAY, BUT IT WAS SOMEONE'S BIRTHDAY, and so against my better judgment I went shopping with several of my children at Price Savers in Provo, Utah. The parking lot was crowded, almost full, but we were lucky enough to arrive just as a car was pulling out of a place right across from the front door. I waited a few seconds while the car backed out and then began to pull my van into the space. Suddenly, a small car shot around from behind me, cut across my path and into the space. I stared at the driver in disbelief; she grinned and waved a clenched fist at me while her three children in the back seat cheered. A little thing, I suppose. Just one good Mormon housewife beating out another good Mormon housewife in the battle of life. But it was distressing to me, and to my children, that they should care so much for their victory and so little for us.

There is more to this story, though. For I have to admit that I did not just drive away in sorrow to find another spot. I honked my horn as I passed her. I muttered something about drivers in this state deserving everything my California roommates ever said about them. I silently hoped that when we finally got parked, my foe would still be in sight and I could catch her and say something really nasty to her. But they were inside by the time we could walk from the other end of the lot back to their spot (*our* spot). I wanted to kick her tires. I hoped I would recognize her if I saw her in the store.

Fortunately, I didn't see her again. And, thinking about it later, I was sorry that another person's actions in such a little thing should have provoked such animosity in me. I was sorry for what she did, but even more sorry for how I reacted to it, and for the effects of the whole thing on my children. It is tedious sometimes living under the watchful eyes of impressionable children. I do stupid things. My behavior teaches my children who I am and shows

DONLU THAYER is a house and garden wife (prefers the garden), who lives with her husband, Douglas, and their six children in Provo, Utah. She is a writer, editor, Primary chorister, and aspiring musician. An earlier version of this paper was delivered at Sunstone Symposium in Salt Lake City, 19 August 1988.

them, to the extent that they trust me, how they should be. I want my children to know peace and love in their lives. I worry when my peace departs and my love fails, because I want my influence to counteract, in some respects, other influences in my children's lives, influences of "parking lot," school, neighborhood, scouts, sports, television, movies, and the Church. Yes, the Church, the one that is as true as the gospel, the one I have lived in (and loved) all my life.

The sacrament-meeting speaker was a bright-eyed, well-dressed, happy, articulate woman whose whole life is service to the Church. "I was reading in the Book of Mormon," she said, "and it suddenly came to me what life is all about. Life is a battle, and only those who win the battle will reap the reward. Only those who win will make it to the celestial kingdom to live with our Father in Heaven forever."

"Make it to the celestial kingdom." How many times have I heard that phrase, untroubled? And how is it that it troubles me so much now? Several weeks later I heard another speaker over the same pulpit compare our quest for celestial glory to the quest of the Olympic athletes in Seoul. "Not that there is only one winner in our race," he said. "In *our* race, we can all be winners. We're all striving to do our personal best, and we can emulate these great athletes in their own quests for glory." (Unfortunately, his most important example was a man who the next day left the games in disgrace when it was discovered that he had used drugs to help fuel his personal quest for glory. Of course, the commentators said, he was a poor sport. This was the failure of a man, they said, not of a system.)

Examples, heroes. We want them, need them. At a recent ward conference, a stake youth leader told about her hero: Donald Trump. "And do you know why?" she asked an amazed congregation (I *hope* that most of them were amazed). "Because, of all the *selfish* ways he could have used his money, he chose to beautify New York City." I hear that he has even consented to "look into" the problem of the New York homeless.

At least the brother whose sermon was geared to getting us off to a goal-setting start in the new year picked a hero from the Bible. When, after five or six examples from sports, this brother brought up the boy David, the story of David and Goliath, my hope rose. (David, I thought, strengthened by the Lord, fighting the Lord's battle, in His name.) But as the speaker began to explicate the text, my hopes failed. He used I Samuel 17:25-26 to explain that in his contest with Goliath, essentially an athletic contest, David's objective was the reward, specifically, the part of the reward involving the king's daughter. "Remember this," the speaker said. "When David went out to meet Goliath, he wasn't looking at Goliath. He had his eye on the princess." This was an example he recommended to us all.

I found all of these sermons to be not merely uninspiring, but wrong, dangerous, even blasphemous. They seemed to me to represent and promote a view of the world that I am trying to overcome in myself, a view that is inimical to the gospel of Jesus Christ. They seemed to represent a competitive, goal-oriented, self-focusing mindset that is alien to the way of light and truth

Jesus embodies and calls us to follow. I worry that here in Zion all is not well, that individually and as a people we tend to accept uncritically the notion that we can frame and see our own best goals clearly, that we must pursue our own goals regardless of the consequences for others, that our own success justifies any means we may need to use to "get there," indeed, that our own worth can be established at the expense of others.

It's a tricky problem. Is writing what I am writing here a competitive activity? Do these well-intentioned people I have used as examples merit my mockery? Is the anger and frustration I feel during sermons such as theirs really righteous indignation that truth is not heard? Or is it sour grapes that "their kind" keep the pulpit, while folks like me languish in "fringe publications"? I don't always know. It is difficult to keep the heart pure.

"What do you have to do to get to the top kingdom?" our son asks, coming home from Primary. I can tell right away how his Primary teacher sees the world. I hesitate to tell him that I am not much concerned with such questions these days, because I remember well the days when such questions concerned me very much. So I try to respond.

"The celestial kingdom is the dwelling place of gods," I tell him. "To live in celestial glory, we must become celestial beings, gods ourselves. We have to learn to love as God loves . . ."

"Yea, well, what d'you have to *do to make it*?"

I don't blame him for talking this way; this language of striving is the language of his culture, a culture that sees the good life in terms of goals reached, conquests made, prizes and victories won. I don't *want* my son to see life this way, though. I think such a worldview will hurt him and will cause him to hurt others.

I know what his Primary teacher would say if I were to tell him this. He would say, "What's the matter with you? Don't you want this kid to succeed in life?"

Not exactly, I would have to say. What I want is for him to find joy in this life and in the eternal world to come. And I don't think that he will find joy in goal-oriented striving for victory; I don't think that he will find joy in competing with others in vain attempts to establish his own worth. I think he will only find joy when love is the motive for all his actions. And how will he learn love? By being loved, I think, and by being taught correct principles and then being trusted to learn and live according to them.

I worry about the prevalence of the view of human nature that allows us to raise children by luring them, bribing them, manipulating them, threatening them, rewarding them into good behavior (and therefore, it is supposed, into righteousness). "I know," said a very competent elementary school teacher when I said this to her. "I'd like them to be good for nothing, too." Perhaps it is unfortunate, she told me, but what you *have* to do to get kids moving is promise them a reward. Better yet, invite them to a contest and induce them to be winners. Competition is "goal-oriented striving *par excellence*" (Kohn 1986, 82).

The trouble is, in serious competition winning isn't everything (as the famous coach has said); it is the only thing. For a truly competitive person,

victory is the single goal that provides the most important motive for action in relationship to others. All sorts of means are justified in reaching this goal. Generally speaking, these are not the means to change, progress, learning, growth; they are merely the means to winning.

Most people will concede that competitiveness *can* be bad if it gets out of hand, if it gets *ruthless*. But this wouldn't stop most people from valuing competition itself or from helping their children develop competitive attitudes. This reminds me of the view the French have towards wine. And certainly it is true that all French children who drink wine with their meals do not grow up to be alcoholics. I will also concede that I know several American adults who seem to be essentially free of competitiveness. Perhaps competition is only bad for people like me, who have a predisposition to becoming *fiercely* competitive.

"Ah, wake up and smell the bacon, lady," my son's Primary teacher (who considers "fiercely competitive" a compliment) might say if I were to go on like this. His response would anger me. He would be wrong. I would be right. I would want to argue with him and win my point. I know how to win arguments. In high school debate we practiced winning arguments even if we didn't believe what we were saying. This was supposed to be fun, and our victories would bring academic glory to the school. I could win, but I didn't like doing it when my heart wasn't in it. I know that I could win the argument with my son's teacher, too. But, deep down, I know that this would not change the man's heart. I know, too, that the momentary triumph I would feel at arguing him into the ground would soon turn bitter. I would feel ashamed and want to apologize. How could this be, since I am *right*? But I know it would happen.

I wonder sometimes if Mormons, believing in the true and living God and a real live devil, are not particularly vulnerable to the dangers of a competitive mindset. Perhaps certain of our beliefs help us rationalize this mindset and keep us from seeing the need to change. When I think about my own competitiveness, about its effects on me, I know *I* need to change. I think of all the pain competing has brought me — emptiness of victory, agony of defeat. Competing never brought me anything I really wanted, never brought peace or love. Why didn't I just reject my culture's sanctions of competition as the way to get everything worth having? Haven't I always believed that although it is in our natures to be "enemies" to God, to "seek our own," to kick against the pricks, to exercise unrighteous dominion, we *can* yield to the enticings of the spirit of God and in this yielding find the truth that frees us to be friends of God? Then why am I still competing?

Trying to find some answers to this question is a matter of urgency for me. As my children grow up and learn to assert their own wills, find themselves, protect themselves, advance themselves, it is likely that they will find, as I have, that yielding to God and to others in love can become more and more difficult, until there is real pain, real struggle, something to conquer, before the yielding comes. Competing has hurt me, has stopped me, has damned me, and I want to teach something else to my children. Yet, for reasons that I have not always clearly understood, I have felt that I must compete, even with myself,

in order just to “maintain,” let alone move forward. And what I do, my children learn.

It is easy to rationalize the competitive “instinct.” Competition “feels natural,” and it *works*. It’s a hard world, isn’t it? We need to make our way, not only for our own sakes, but for the sakes of others who depend on us. We work hard, and we want to get as much as we can for our efforts. We do what works, to get things done. So when at the end of a busy day we want the kids in bed, we stage a race to the bedroom and love best the one who wins.

Thus we plant in others the seeds once sown in us. Life is a race. The race is to the swift. Be a winner. Nobody loves a loser. Who can be first? Who can be best?

Or how about, Who can be the most reverent? Can we be blamed, though, for *whatever* we can come up with to keep children occupied in church? One of the more interesting challenges presented by the consolidated schedule is Primary Sharing Time. There are all those children, together, in the Lord’s house on the Sabbath day. Afraid that the children will not respond, will not be good, we make plans. We motivate singing by dividing the children up to see which group can sing best. We have scripture chases, play gospel-concept Concentration, Book of Mormon Double Jeopardy, First Vision Baseball, Church History Tic-Tac-Toe. Having worked so hard to provide these activities, we are dismayed when the kids, wanting to win the games we have set for them, end up shouting at each other, and we berate them for failing to be reverent in Heavenly Father’s house.

One particular Primary Sharing Time I remember to my own chagrin. During a Book of Mormon characters identification competition, my son was belittled by an angry teammate for failing to distinguish Ammon from Alma. “Better study up on your Book of Mormon,” this kid snorted at my son. Better study up on your manners, you little twerp, I muttered in my mind. It isn’t my son’s fault; I’m too busy teaching him not to behave the way you’re behaving to make sure he knows every character in the Book of Mormon.

But, of course, I felt guilty. Perhaps I *should* have bought those illustrated scripture redactions. Then my son would have known who was who and wouldn’t have been embarrassed like that — and I would have been thought of as the kind of good mother the angry teammate’s mother is. (Of course, now they have those cartoons, so that children can learn in the manner to which they are most accustomed to distinguish Ammon from Alma, Laman from Laban, Nehor from Korihor, Korihor from Skeletor, Helaman from He-man.)

When I stopped being sarcastic and really thought about this incident, I was ashamed of myself. My son wasn’t nearly as embarrassed or upset as I was. In my embarrassment, born of my competitiveness, I had forgotten who I was, who my son was, and who my neighbor was. It had all become an internal battle of abstractions, yet another attempt to fill my personal emptiness by vanquishing the foe. In my struggle that day to deal with my resentment of a child who had belittled my son, I thought I learned something important. When I was able to sacrifice my competitiveness momentarily, to

learn what the experience had to teach, a whole category of resentments washed away, and I was still intact. I didn't need to stand on anyone else's head (that's what the resentments were enabling me to do) to keep my own head in fresh air.

A few months later, though, in the parking lot at Price Savers, I found that I hadn't really learned anything yet. My sense of well-being, of worth, my source of peace, were still focused outside myself. The competitive heart is a heart that has not yet learned to act on its own; it is not a *true* heart, independent in its own sphere, so to speak. Competing to establish worth by superior performance never works in the long run, because it denies reality. The God we emulate is not the Great I Do, but the Great I Am, a self-existent being, beyond compare. "These two facts do exist, that there are two spirits, one being more intelligent than the other; there shall be another more intelligent than they; I am the Lord thy God, I am more intelligent than they all" (Abraham 3:19). This is not an invitation to a race. It is a description of what is. It is for us to be still and know this reality.

Yet, our acceptance must not be resignation. We must not deny what there is in us to *become*. The rigidly stratified (and in some measure secure) society my English forbears left for the challenges of the Utah desert was not the kingdom of God. But was it less remote from God's kingdom than was what has blossomed in this place?

What do we mean when we declare ourselves to be "successful"? Getting right down to it, what is the purpose and effect of declaring ourselves "the fastest growing church in the world," "the best stake in the Church," "the top baptizing district in the mission," "the number-one co-ed volleyball team in the region," "first place in the roadshow competition," "the winner of the Eliza R. Snow poetry contest," or the recipient of the DIALOGUE or *Sunstone* prize for the best short story?

But contests are created to give a meaning and focus for activity, to get people to do something that they might not otherwise do. How people respond to a contest is up to them — whether they compete for fun, for a sense of meeting a challenge, testing, improving themselves, whether they hope to gain the attention of those who appreciate good literature or good music or the beauty of fine athletic performance, or to please those who get vicarious thrills out of watching competition. If a competitor competes out of a personal need to establish his or her own worth by defeating someone else, this is not the fault of the contest, is it? But perhaps it is. In pondering the recent "steroid scandals," some people have begun to wonder about the responsibility of the system itself in a competitor's fall from virtue.

It might be well for those who would be saints of God to consider what they mean by offering to establish or find worth in the victories of one human being over another in what would otherwise be benign activities. "Every contest," says Alfie Kohn, "is the creation of a desired and scarce status" (1986, 74). We set up contests to find winners, but almost always there will be many times more losers than winners. And if we take the contest model as our model for reality, we will always see the wrong reality. Competitiveness arises from

a false economy of scarcity. This is not the economy of God. "I am come," Jesus said, "that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly" (John 10:10). "I the Lord am willing to make these things known unto all flesh; For I am no respecter of persons, and will that all men shall know" (D&C 1:34-35). God is not protecting his status at the top. He wants us all to come where he is.

Competitiveness can both manifest and perpetuate emptiness. Like anxious children, afraid that at any moment the love we need might fail, we reach, we strive, we stride. And, as if there weren't already enough emptiness, we work hard to create more of it by making a contest of everything from teethbrushing to temple attendance. From parking to parenthood.

But, isn't this to be expected in a fundamentally paradoxical universe? Don't we believe that there must needs be opposition in all things and that we must always strive to overcome opposition? Joy is defined against pain, perhaps even derived from it. The fight with sin is real. It will be long and must go on.

Here, I think, is the particular danger for Latter-day Saints who have learned this doctrine. For even in the struggle to conquer evil in ourselves and in the universe, we must take care. There is danger in attempting to force creation to serve our own needs. There is arrogance, for example, in *creating* pain, as we can do in creating and submitting to structures for competition. And there is arrogance and willfulness in seeking to vanquish another to destroy our own pain or prevent our own pain, as we almost always do when we compete. In the competitive heart is the tendency to regard the inevitable polarities of existence as opportunities for conquest and self-advancement. Competitiveness seeks to establish truth at one pole, rather than receiving the truth that comes from negotiating paradoxes, from "proving contraries." We understand that without an opposition in all things, the work of God would be for nothing (there would *be* nothing), but we must take care not to see an *opponent* in all things and therefore deny the work of God. The work and glory of God are to bring to pass immortality and eternal life for others. The work of God in the universe, then, is the work of creation, of bringing new life out of relationship. All other work is vain, empty.

"It is vain," said Joseph Smith, "for persons to fancy themselves that they are heirs" of eternal life unless they are willing to "offer their all in sacrifice." The "sacrifice of all earthly things" is necessary to develop living faith, and it is "through this sacrifice, and this only, that God has ordained that men should enjoy eternal life" (in Lundwall n.d., 58). Lyndon Cook has suggested that the mature views of Joseph Smith concerning such a sacrifice are represented in the covenants and ordinances of the temple endowment: "By living faithful to all of his temple covenants the steward would, in the resurrection, inherit the highest degree of God's glory" (1985, 92).

Latter-day Saints who are endowed in the temple, then, covenant to consecrate (that is, dedicate to holy purposes) all that we have and are (all that is ours, after all, only by the grace of God) to the work of God on the earth. In this way, in our capacity and willingness to sacrifice to bring others into life, we find eternal life ourselves. In promising to do God's work, we promise, in

effect, to love as God loves. From this promise comes the *motive* for all that we do, else we are nothing. For no other success can compensate for failure to love.

Popular psychiatrist Scott Peck defines evil “most simply as the use of political power to destroy others for the purpose of defending or preserving the integrity of one’s sick self” (1981, 241). Perhaps this definition could help warn us against our tendency to use power to diminish others for the purpose of preserving (or exalting) ourselves. In such an action we separate ourselves from one another. Those of us who have made covenants to bring wholeness to the world by our sacrifice of all earthly things, break the body of Christ as we separate ourselves from one another. This is not a holy breaking, a sacramental one, but an unholy one, a desecration.

Jesus Christ came, God on earth, to lay down his body for us and be lifted up for us. And his body, whole, is the metaphor for the unity in love of God’s children on earth, those people who are his, who are like him. In the Book of Mormon we read in Fourth Nephi how members of the Church, after personal instruction by the risen Lord, made Zion, the community of health, wholeness, holiness. For two hundred years they lived together with “no contentions and disputations among them.” They dealt justly with one another and had all things in common; “therefore there were not rich and poor, bond and free, but they all were made free, and partakers of the heavenly gift” (4 Ne. 2–3).

In discussions of this passage among Latter-day Saints, I have sometimes heard it said that yes, that was then, and perhaps will be again, but this is now. For now, the poor are always with us (probably, I have heard say, because they weren’t completely valiant in the pre-existence), but the righteous prosper. The Book of Mormon tells us so. We who prosper (and are therefore righteous) bless the Church (and the poor) because we pay a lot of tithing, and we provide “the real leadership” for the Church and can attract other “quality” people to the Church. There is some question, of course, as to whether we should pay tithing on the net or on the gross. . . .

It is difficult for people living in a materialistic, secular culture to understand the requirements of a covenant to sacrifice all earthly things to make the world holy. We are grateful to have the requirements for good standing in the Church spelled out so that we can check them off on our list of accomplishments and go away justified. “One of the least noticed features of competition — and, specifically of its product-orientation — is the emphasis on quantification . . . reducing things to what can be counted and measured” (Kohn 1986, 85). We pay tithes and offerings, keep the rules, and fill Church assignments, and in this way we determine how well we are doing in the race for the celestial gates.

For many Mormons, the ultimate assignment is temple work, and in a secular culture it is quite natural that the temple would be seen not so much as a holy place from which holiness moves into the world (of both living and dead) as a place to fill (and report) quotas (ever more efficiently). It is natural that eternal life would be seen not as the state of seeking forever the good of others, found by sacrificing all earthly things, but as one of the rewards for making it to the top, to the celestial kingdom, a place beyond an ultimate goal

line, an achievement reached by striving for and attaining excellence no matter what the cost to others.

Of course, the "excellence" of individuals reflects on the group, on the Mormon team, and so we like to talk about it. The individual thus becomes a product, a statistic, an example of how all is well in Zion, yea, how Zion prospers. This fondness of ours for pointing out how Zion does indeed prosper, and how we are, after all, a "not-so-peculiar" people, is a manifestation of what I call MODDS, the Mormon Dancing Dog Syndrome: Look, look! A successful Mormon businessman (scientist, lawyer, doctor, chief). Look! A great Mormon athlete, scholar, musician! Look! Look! A Mormon beauty queen! You, too, can be a queen — diet, exercise, get the right clothes in the right colors (dress for success), shave your armpits and your legs of course, and voila! a beauty queen. Or else a sister missionary.

I refer in this last jibe to the now-defunct MTC "charm school," which once sought to render sisters from all over the world more presentable as they presented the gospel message. The charm school has, I am happy to say, been given up. And now BYU has given up its queen contest! Unfortunately, however, there is now a more comprehensive contest in its place. It is too bad, I think, that BYU can't do away with contests for "best person" altogether.

I wonder why we chase after the world the way we do, why we try so hard to attract the world to our version of itself. (It is not enough for BYU to be "the Lord's university"; it must also try to become "the Harvard of the West.") Perhaps we still feel the need to compromise with the world in order to keep our influence (or accreditation) in it. Perhaps we believe that the urgency and importance of our message justifies any means we might use in spreading it. Isn't Church public relations, for example, just a way of letting our light shine so that others, seeing it, will know and glorify our Father in Heaven? I wonder, though, what our behavior actually reveals about the gods we worship. And sometimes I worry that our behavior reveals our doubts about the power of the gospel itself to change hearts (or hold our own hearts).

Even saying all of this, I don't mean to suggest that the Church is full of bad or stupid people. I think some of us are misguided, however, unaware of the real meaning and effects of, the real fault in, what we do. If we knew better, we would do better. But what keeps us from knowing better? Partly, it is our conviction that we are *right*, whatever we do. In the stake where I live, top stake in the Church as some see it, we are *very* right. Right church, right country, right politics (right wing), right jobs. How could we ever be wrong about anything? But hey, you can have it, too. Just join the Mormon Club, and you will prosper, as the Lord has promised.

David Ehrenfeld, in the introduction to his book *The Arrogance of Humanism*, says that the "snare of stewardship is that the steward may forget that he is not a king" (1981, x). I think that many Mormons would miss the warning. Perhaps they would like the title of Ehrenfeld's book, though. Yes, humanists are arrogant. And we thank thee, Lord, that we are not as the humanists are. The Book of Mormon is full of warnings about arrogance, about pride. Yes, pride is bad. Arrogance is bad. We *know* this.

Of course, I am here to say that we don't know it very well. The particular arrogance of Mormons, rationalized by our view of God and God's true church, is a commonplace theme among our critics, who can easily misunderstand our beliefs and intentions. What is more troubling to me is the pride, the arrogance, the competitiveness that keep us from true community *within* the Church. For, as most of us surely know, there can be a great deal of private pain behind the Happy Mormon Image.

My friend who thinks life is a battle is happy (we are all enlisted, joyfully, joyfully, marching to our home). But some of us watching her happiness are not happy. Trying to measure up to the image, afraid that we will appear less than perfect to others, we are sometimes lonely. Although our lives are tied up in the Church, we measure and judge ourselves and others, and imagine they are measuring and judging us, and so we feel divided from one another. If we look to the institutional Church itself to strengthen us in holiness, we are sometimes disappointed. We are intimidated and depressed by Relief Society lessons. We wonder at the "showcase families" whose children excel in every way when our own lives are full of trouble and pain. It is difficult to find comfort from or feel kinship with a splendid example of righteous living.

Perhaps we are merely looking for a place to worship in peace, and we find something else. "I expected it to be a holy experience," our daughter said, returning from her first time being baptized for the dead. "But it was hard to feel holy with a locker key pinned to me and a big computer at the font. It was hard to feel that I was really in the house of the Lord." I had to admit that locker keys in the temple had once bothered me, too, and the computers had bothered me more recently. "All the better to count you with, my dear," I wanted to say to my daughter, but I didn't. "The world will always come in," I said instead, "even in the holiest places on this earth. *You* will have to keep it out."

And so I try to tell myself, if I am uncomfortable or unhappy in sacrament meeting or Relief Society it could be because I am striving with what I hear instead of receiving it. If the Spirit tells me that what I hear is truly misguided, I can reject it. If what I hear is a true call to repentance, I can repent. Repentance means this: turning again to God, understanding again (and again) how to do the work of God in the world with a pure heart, sacrificing all earthly things, even my competitiveness and my loneliness, in my attempts to make connection with others. This is how I will find confidence that I do not, in the words of Joseph Smith, "seek the face of God in vain."

I heard in stake conference that the face of God is the face of a coach, or of a horse trainer. Our job, the speaker (himself a much-honored athletic coach) said, is to learn to hear the voice of the coach (or the bell of the horse trainer) and to respond instantly, precisely, regardless of how desire or personal judgment might tempt us to do otherwise. This is how we become champions, how we win the race and reach our eternal goal in the top kingdom. I rejected this metaphor, perhaps more out of personal distaste than inspiration, for I did it with a very critical heart indeed. It put me in mind of the rich young man of the New Testament. He was a champion, a real super-striver. He had everything, and was a good person too, having kept the commandments of God

(the ones on his checklist anyway) from his youth. I wonder what he wanted from Jesus. The Super Checklist, the Ultimate Good defined? Whatever he wanted, it wasn't what he got.

"Good master," the young man said, letting it be known that he recognized the right side. "What good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?" Jesus told him that only God was good. (Don't be a hypocrite, young man; you are not calling me good because you recognize me, but only because you want something; eternal life is not something you "have." It is something you become, by losing yourself.) And the young man went away sorrowing, for he had great possessions. The perfect youth had grown into a perfect example, a product-oriented man with a lot to lose. He would not lose it and so could not find himself.

The entire Matthew 19–20 lesson in which this story is set rejects competitiveness. It begins with the discourse on marriage (the union of necessary opposites), then the blessing of the little children whom the disciples rebuked, for of such is the kingdom of heaven. But how is it that we learn to be childlike after we have grown? (I think some of us were never childlike in the first place.) As though anticipating the question, the gospel writer next shows us the good boy grown up, with so many earthly things possessing him that he will not submit to his Father. Then come the disciples, who have done what the rich young man will not, who have forsaken all to follow Jesus. Now they want to know what they will get for what they've done. Patient, Jesus tells them of their place in his kingdom. And then he repeats his message to the rich young man: Forsake everything for my sake, and you have eternal life. But if you are doing this for the reward, beware. Many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first.

As a reforming competer, I will admit that I have sometimes wanted to skip quickly over what comes next — the parable of the laborers in the vineyard (so unfair, isn't it?) — and move on to an easier part, to snickering at the presumption, the blatant competitiveness of the mother of Zebedee's children. But this part isn't really easier. To answer their mother, Jesus asks James and John: Can you do what I do? Can you take into yourselves, receive, what I receive? The kingdom is not a trophy. It is the abode of those for whom my Father has prepared it. The holy ones. Ten of the disciples are indignant at what they think they have heard (that James and John have beat them out). But dominion in the kingdom is not like dominion on earth. Many are called, but few are chosen, because their hearts are so set on the things of this world that they forget that the power of God is love, and all else is vain. "Whoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant." "The last shall be first, and the first shall be last." (See also D&C 121:34–40.)

Isn't that interesting? What a paradox, eh? Well, we want to be first, so we'd better get on with being last. Let's get out there and serve, sacrifice for the kingdom, lay down our lives, bear our testimonies about how humble we feel for being privileged to serve the Saints of God (among such great people as our companions in service — of course, we're not great, but the others doing what we're doing are great).

The trouble is, of course, that we cannot become humble by paying attention to (quantifying and being proud of) our efforts at humility. True humility is found only in the self-forgetfulness of a self-existent being. Losing ourselves in the sacrifice of all earthly things is not a means to an end. In the economy of God, there are no "ends" in this sense; there are only "means." We are not made mortal in order to see how much we can get in the game of life; we are here in the process of entering into the way of life. Jesus gave himself, our loving friend, so that he could show us the way of life. We learn to walk in the Way as we live out the story of our own lives in relationship to others.

I have a friend who, perhaps because of the way she was treated as a child, never feels that she can measure up. "I guess I'll never make it to the celestial kingdom," she says. "I'm a nobody in the Church; I'm just not the kind of person the Lord wants." I happen to know that this woman works very hard at her Church callings, which are always the invisible kinds of callings. She also spends a great deal of time in service to others, doing things she likes to do and is good at. None of this counts, though, because much of it "isn't what the Church asks." She keeps comparing herself to others whose callings bring them into prominence. Seeing life as a contest, she has decided herself a loser. Much of the time she is angry, defensive, bitter.

The trouble with product orientation is that you can fail just by comparing your list with another list. It will be difficult for my friend to sacrifice her worldly notions about success in the Church and learn to believe in the goodness of her own heart. She learned at such an early age to believe that life was on every front a race, a battle, and she was a loser.

How, I wonder, would things be different for her if she had learned a different view of life, a view, for instance, that a young friend of mine learns from his mother. Once when he was a deacon, he came home from a priesthood meeting and told his mother that he didn't think he was doing enough for Heavenly Father's church. His mother told him something like this: "Every time you tie your little brother's shoes or feed him his breakfast or help him put on his shirt or tell him a story, you are doing something for Heavenly Father's church."

Many Latter-day Saints, however, believe that "Heavenly Father's church" is the LDS institution, pure and simple. Such people, if they are in positions of leadership, tend to castigate those who fail to "support the programs" and tend to see the programs themselves rather narrowly. But unrighteous dominion lurks in this misunderstanding of the purpose of the programs — unrighteous dominion and a lot of just plain foolishness. I could mention, for instance, the Young Women's lesson on hairstyling my daughter chose to miss, thereby coming to be accused of failing to support her leaders (a few such misses can label a child "inactive"). Or I could mention the water outing the youth of our ward enjoyed. In a post-activity evaluation meeting, the outing, considered a great success by all who attended, was called by the youth leaders "a failure in terms of its goals" because it did not "activate" even one inactive youth.

Even in the face of obvious weaknesses in the institution, failure of programs or changes, it seems difficult for some committed people (perhaps because their commitment costs them so much?) to remember that although the Church *is* as true as the gospel, its programs and people are not infallible. I want to meet the man, a stake president from Mexico City, who told a friend of mine, "I wish you Americans would stop trying to export your bureaucratic neurosis and just let us live the gospel."

American bureaucracy arises in a culture that values competitiveness as essential in maintaining the rivalry that gets and keeps us moving, accomplishing. "Enemies," says critic Anne Strick, "is what our legal system is all about" (in Kohn 1986, 162). Add to the list our political system, our education system, as well as our most popular leisure activities. In fact, Kohn observes that

participation in sports amounts to a kind of apprenticeship for life in contemporary America. . . . Sport does not simply build character. . . . It builds exactly the kind of character that is most useful for the social system. . . . Athletes are quite deliberately led to accept the value and naturalness of an adversarial relationship in place of . . . collective effort. If he is in a team sport, the athlete comes to see cooperation only as a means to victory, to see hostility and even aggression as legitimate, to accept conformity and authoritarianism. (1986, 85)

Michael Novak is a great baseball fan and a "staunch defender of competition"; he, nevertheless, has observed that "our sports are lively with the sense of evil, [providing] an almost deliberate exercise in pushing the psyche to cheat and take advantage, to be ruthless, cruel, deceitful, vengeful, and aggressive" (in Kohn 1986, 163).

I do not want to deny the value of all sports or criticize the interests, pleasures, and accomplishments of all athletes, coaches, and fans. (We in the "academic world" certainly are not free of the sort of evil Novak describes.) But since sports are so popular among Latter-day Saints, and since they find so much place in our pulpit and classroom rhetoric, I think that we might be wary. If it is true that "the way to the board room is through the locker room," and if what Novak says about the values of the locker room is true, perhaps a Latter-day Saint might be wary of the values of corporate America. As we seek to spread the gospel throughout the world, I think we must take very great care not to spread the American competitive sickness along with it.

Driving past Cougar Stadium and the BYU baseball field one day, I saw on the slogan board in front of a nearby motel something that I suppose was meant to amuse parents of graduating BYU students: "The only good thing about being imperfect is the joy it brings to others." We see the sickness, don't we, and we try to laugh it off. It is sick, unhealthy, unholy, sinful to derive pleasure from the pain of others. And we don't have to do it. I don't mean to suggest that we stop improving ourselves, stop building character by challenging our minds and bodies, stop playing, stop having fun. But I want to suggest, as Kohn does, that true play, true accomplishment, true improvement are not competitive activities, are not concerned with quantification and victory, are process-oriented rather than product-oriented. Like the seven-year-old athlete who was asked how fast he had run and replied, 'As fast as I could,'

the process-oriented individual gladly gives up precision — particularly precision in the service of determining who is best — in exchange for pure enjoyment. He who plays does not ask the score: In fact, there is no score kept (Kohn 1986, 86).

In the Hindu parable of the wishing tree, the children have only to wish, and they get what they want. Of course, with that wish comes its opposite, because that is how the world is. Candy and stomachaches, toys and boredom. The children grow up wishing; soon they are wishing for the four things every grown-up wants, so the story goes — sex, fame, power, and money. They get all these things, and with them their opposites. They grow old. They are discouraged with the way things are. Some of them say the world is a terrible place, and that's all there is to it. Some others say it would have been all right, if they had just made the right wishes. A third group just want to die; they wish for it, and they do die, but then, of course, they are reborn to start all over again.

But this isn't the end of the story. One of the children is a crippled boy who gets trampled in the rush to the tree and crawls off into a hut to wait for his turn at wishing. He grows old along with the rest, watching what happens to them and waiting. At last, in one dazzling, illuminating spectacle he sees the whole thing, and he marvels at the spectacle of the universe. At that moment, he feels a rush of compassion for his companions under the tree, and in that rush of compassion, he forgets to wish. He forgets to wish, and the tree can't touch him. He is free (Lal 1981, 102-5).

He forgets to wish, to "seek his own," and he is free. Competitiveness is self-seeking; ultimately, it is arrogant; it strives to assert a personal unworkable will, to conquer what cannot be conquered. This is bondage.

In the story of Jehovah and Lucifer, Jehovah submits his own will to the will of his Father, the embodiment of self-existent Good, while Lucifer attempts to assert his own reality in place of the Good. Ironically, his plan is to eliminate all opposition (all competition) and guarantee that everyone meets the goal and ends up in the right place. But this is impossible. "I will send the first," God says. Although there are opposing ideas, there is no contest. Still, Lucifer, competing, has lost, and he must strive to destroy his loss. "Competition seeks to prove superiority, even if it doesn't exist" (Kohn 1986, 77). Lucifer wants to be best; Jehovah desires what will work. Jehovah is truth; Lucifer is error, and his refusal to repent, to turn his face to God, results in his fall forever from the path to eternal life. There was no joy in heaven at this "victory": the hosts of heaven wept at the fall of the bright one. But he who wanted the glory for himself now seeks to make all humans miserable like unto himself.

Unlike Alfie Kohn, whose book *No Contest: The Case Against Competition* has given me so much useful material for this paper, I believe in the reality of this fallen personality. Evil is not eliminated by merely defining it out of existence. We do not compete, as Kohn suggests, merely because we have grown up in a competitive society. I believe that we have voluntarily "fallen" into a world of limited time and space, that we have taken upon ourselves

estrangement from God to live in an economy of scarcity, where the survival of one creature can mean the extinction of another. We are, therefore, in our fallen natures inevitably self-serving beings. But I also believe that this very aspect of our natures contains that which enables us to become otherwise, indeed, that which enables us to comprehend and accept the abundance of God's love and thereby to become as God is. For, in our opportunity and ability to yield a "self" that *wants* to choose itself, to yield this self to a higher will, we exercise a freedom of will that teaches us truth. This truth, in turn, increases our freedom. And thus, in choosing truth eternally, we progress eternally.

So, in decrying competitiveness (distinguished from Kohn's decrying all competition), I do not mean to deny the value of struggle to conquer sin and evil. I mean, primarily, to deplore the attitude of heart that finds and rejoices in its own worth at the expense of, in the defeat of others, an attitude I call "secular." The secular being can kill animals for sport and can see war as a game. One whose attitude or view of life is "sacred," however, takes life only out of necessity, kills animals with gratitude for their sacrifice, and sees war as a tragic consequence of sin. (Isn't there something a little strange in our singing "We are all enlisted till the conflict is o'er. Happy are we!")

And, in spite of what some of our forebears left us believing, I do not think that all struggle, all striving, all difficulty, all hard work, all self-denial are the works of righteousness, and are sacred. Lucifer's plan would have demanded a great deal of effort and probably an immense bureaucracy filled with dedicated competitors. The expansive American bureaucracy deplored by the wise stake president was built by energetic people, trained in the power of rivalry.

Early in life, the American child begins to learn about this rivalry and about a certain hypocrisy that goes with it. For the American child must compete without seeming to be competitive (see Seely, Sim, and Loosely 1956, 229). He must be a good sport, a good loser. This trick, "a matter of rearranging our face and affecting an attitude" (Kohn 1986, 117), is taught in our schools and on our athletic fields. Good sportsmanship is an attempt to mitigate the evils of competition with the good of cooperation.

In school, we encourage cooperation in moralistic maxims, says Kohn, but we actually focus on developing competitive behaviors (Vance and Richmond 1975, 118). We excuse such perverse pedagogy by explaining that children need to learn to compete — to win and to lose and to do it gracefully — in order to get along in life. This actually means for most children that they will spend a lot of time losing. And this, we hope, will prepare them for the rude shocks of life. The truth is that it is *acceptance* in the early years that best allows us to deal with rejection later. It is an initial sense of security that gives us strength to face adversity, and this security "is precisely what competition inhibits" (Kohn 1986, 119, 123).

But what about those "realities of the world"? Don't we owe it to our children to train them to succeed in the secular culture in which they find themselves? Doesn't that mean that we have to motivate them? It is necessary, isn't it, to provide extrinsic incentives or rewards, or nobody would do any-

thing they ought to do. Appealing to a child's "natural competitive instincts" is just good behavior management.

First of all, as Kohn takes pains to show, from a purely practical point of view, the only extrinsic motivator that really works is a sense of accountability to others (1986, 61). It is cooperation, not competition, that really gets things done, really helps us "succeed," and makes us feel good too. Without charity, without love, the gospel teaches, we are nothing. No other motivation has any eternal worth. No end justifies the wrong means. Love is the only thing that *works*.

The way of love, as Joseph Smith said, is to teach correct principles and then let people govern themselves. Of course, children and other ignorant people are not always to be trusted to understand the principles necessary to govern themselves properly. And so we, parents and other leaders, feeling accountable, see our continued governing as necessary so that our charges might learn, from experiences they are persuaded to have, what the correct principles are. In our attempts to govern, we speak of awards, rewards, goals, achievement, and winning as though heedless of how these words fall upon the ears and hearts of people trained to compete. Thus, in our anxious striving to get people to do right, we can hide from ourselves and others both our inadequacy as teachers and our lack of faith in those we teach. Moreover, in our anxiety to make the voice of truth heard over the din of the surrounding culture, we *compete* with the influence of the culture, and in so setting ourselves at one "pole," we close ourselves off from information we might need, and we risk unrighteous dominion, which violates the covenant of stewardship we have made.

I do believe that most of us do not intend, with our admonitions for striving, to teach that anyone should stand on anyone else's head to get higher. I even believe that most of us don't really mean in our own competing to hurt others. When we realize that there is a real *person* who might suffer at our victory, we usually feel bad about it. But rather than trying to find another way, rather than giving up the competition, we try to mitigate the effects of what we do and so make ourselves feel better. We work at denying our real feelings of loss so that we can be good sports. And we work at denying the personal reality of our foes, turning them into abstractions — numbers or ideas. As Ronald Reagan, while he was governor of California, reportedly advised a college football team, "You can feel a clean hatred for your opponent. It is a clean hatred since it's only symbolic in a jersey" (Kohn 1986, 84). Turning people into symbols so that we can hate them and therefore vanquish them is, of course, how we wage war, how we get ordinary people to kill other people.

We live in a world full of conflict and paradox. But if we have a competitive worldview, we are in danger of perceiving the paradoxes incorrectly or misconstruing them. We can, for example, perceive polarity where it doesn't exist, seeing ourselves in competition with something we are actually part of. We can also think of polarity in the wrong way. In his essay "Why the Church Is as True as the Gospel," Eugene England explains beautifully the Mormon view of the fundamentally paradoxical nature of the universe. But even so

generous a Christian as Gene can make the errors I fear so much: "Throughout history the most important and productive ideas have been paradoxical, that is, in useful opposition to each other: the energizing force in all art has been conflict and opposition; the basis for success in all economic, political, and other social development has been competition and dialogue" (England 1986, 3).

If success is based on competition, it seems to me that a Christian would have to question the value of this "success" and wonder about its costs. (I sometimes wonder what true spiritual progress the world has known anyway.) And it seems to me that true dialogue ends when competition enters it.

"Think of our government based on checks and balances and our two-party political system. . . . Think of Romanticism versus Classicism . . . , reason versus emotion, freedom versus order, individual integrity versus community responsibility, men versus women . . . , justice versus mercy" (England 1986, 3). Here, it seems to me, are polarities both misconceived and misconstrued. The "useful opposite" of order, for example, is not freedom but chaos. Individual integrity is the *basis* for community responsibility, not its opposite. There is no real justice in the absence of mercy.

But my most important argument with this passage is its use of "versus," a word denoting competitive struggle, to make relationship between the "useful opposites" Gene lists. I believe, as Margaret Toscano has explained, that it is important to distinguish "necessary" opposites from "rival" opposites (1985, 8). Rival opposition is the opposition of good versus evil. Necessary opposition is the "opposition" of female and male, of the electron and the nucleus, or of the nuclear members themselves, a relationship that holds the universe in order, that keeps the atom from collapsing, that says, "There is something, and not nothing." This kind of opposition calls for conjunction, harmony, and balance to bring forth truth. As long as the relationship between the sexes, for instance, is seen in any sense as a "war," we will not be able to yield ourselves to learning what there is to learn from the otherness of sexuality.

We do not find eternal life by waging war against each other. We do not find truth by attempting to conquer paradox. We can only break ourselves in the attempt. And this is not just metaphorical language. In concluding his book *Taking the Quantum Leap*, physicist Fred Alan Wolf suggests that understanding quantum mechanics can help us to understand ourselves and make the world a safer, more enjoyable place to live. "Perhaps if people saw that there was no way to break the uncertainty principle, wars would stop. Certainly, if people became aware that a power over another human being was impossible because of quantum physics, the world would be a different place for all of us" (1981, 249). Wolf suggests that we might see God's will exercised in the world of the quantum wave function. This world is "a world of paradox and utter confusion for human, limited intelligence. . . . Yet there is an explicit order to the paradox" (pp. 249-50).

But we, who exist in the world of matter, can only disrupt that perfection of paradox by attempting to observe the pattern We cannot make total order of our observa-

tions. . . . Thus we become helpless, feel inadequate, and long for the order we are helpless to create in the universe. All we can do is go along with it.

On the other hand, we are free to choose. . . . But we cannot predict the results of our choices. We can choose, but we cannot know if our choices will be successful.

The alternative to this uncertain world is a certain world. [This is the world Lucifer wanted to make and get glory for.] In such a world, particles would follow well-determined paths with exact locations at each and every point. But this alternative is known to be unworkable. The tiny electron inside of every atom would have to radiate each and every instant in such a determined world. It would lose all of its energy and quickly fall into the nucleus. All atoms would disappear. All electromagnetic energy would vanish. All nervous systems would cease their activity. All life would stop. For life as we know it can only exist through the blessing of uncertainty, and security is a myth.

Yet security is there. We feel its presence. It is the longing for the perfection of universal order that we all feel. (Wolf 1981, 250)

We cannot fill our longing for the perfection of universal order in a race to qualify for the top. We cannot fill *any* longing, cannot fill ourselves at all by paying attention to ourselves. What we can do, by the grace of God, is transform our longing to be saved, to be received, into a willingness to receive, and thereby to comprehend the truths of the paradoxical reality in which we exist.

Ancient Christianity sometimes created pictures of the righteous laughing in derision at the sinners burning in hell. But the vision of Lehi tells the truth. The derisive laughter comes from the sinners in the great and spacious building, mocking those who, holding steadfast of the word of God, move towards life in the love of God. And it is this vision of the world that I want my children to learn. It is a sacred, mature, Christian view of life. It is a view that is in harmony with the reality of the universe. It is not a view that prevails in American culture; it is not a view always evident in members of the American Mormon Church.

But that does not mean that my children, as American Mormons, cannot learn this way of seeing life. I believe with all my heart that the truths my children need to know are found in the teachings of Jesus Christ that I have learned as a Latter-day Saint. But I also know that I can't expect my children to learn all truth in the certainties of the platitudes they will hear so often over the pulpit. Nor will they find all truth in the narrow security of the Checklist for Perfection. Certainly they will not find all truth in their secular education or in the systems and syllogisms of science and letters. That is to say, truth in its entirety does not reside in the paternalism, striving, or logic of what is sometimes called a "masculine" worldview.

There is an alternative worldview, however, that has traditionally been called "feminine." This view emphasizes a commitment to relationship, "an other-regarding posture that places special emphasis on the connections between people" (Kohn 1986, 176). This is the worldview I would like to help my children, the boys as well as the girls, learn. I believe that this view is compatible with the gospel of Jesus Christ. In this view, "the moral problem arises from conflicting responsibilities rather than competing rights and requires for its resolution a mode of thinking that is contextual and narrative rather than formal and abstract" (Gilligan 1982, 19).

One way of explaining what happens to our understanding of truth as we grow up and meet the complexities of life is to say we learn that truth is relative; we learn to speak of "situational ethics" and so call ourselves mature. Perhaps it is better, for those of us who believe in the reality of Go(o)d and (D)evil, to explain that truth is *contextual*. We can understand, then, that it is a context, a story, such as the parable of the wishing tree, the story of Job, or the parables of Jesus, that invites us into the particular challenges of a mature, "feminine" way of knowing. As Herbert Schneidau has explained,

The great New Testament parables — I would instance particularly the laborers in the vineyard . . . and others like it — are those that make it clear that common truths do not answer the real problems, indeed, that the real problems are so hard we can barely understand or frame them, let alone answer them. Parables are a form of literature whose very existence is itself a parable, a parable about the immense labors of soul-searching and mind-searching needed for understanding. "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?" (John 6:60) so many hearers have said. (1981, 36)

But we can hear hard things. We can hear the parable of the laborers after all, putting aside for a moment our "masculine" notions of justice and entitlement in order to receive the "feminine" message of the mercy and love of God for us all.

And so, receiving this truth, we can change. We can begin to create in ourselves new hearts and new minds. We help others to change by avoiding creating or participating in battles, races, contests. We can resist creating scarcity in the world, for ourselves, our children, our students, our friends, our constituents, our peers, our employees, our congregations, our readers. We can find a more abundant life. At first, we don't see how we can do this. It is difficult to have faith in a way of being we have not known. If we had the faith, we could change our hearts, we could sacrifice all earthly things, even our competitiveness. But how can we find such faith without the strength and understanding that come from having made the sacrifice? We are caught. How can we change?

The way out of this paradox is to accept it, receive it, experiment upon it. I try my way. You try yours. We will not always agree. We are different. Even living in the same church, professing the same core beliefs, we are different. But if we are to be exalted, we must, by the grace of God, become one, must find communion, must find moments when love brings Zion, when love discloses the kingdom of God among us.

For the real story of the universe is not who gets which for what — top kingdom, middle kingdom, bottom kingdom. The story of life and creation is glory of the sun, the glory of the moon, and the glory of the stars. Let us play in the universe, says heart that is true. Let us, undivided from one another, go on to glory.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Cook, Lyndon W. *Joseph Smith and the Law of Consecration*. Provo: Grandin Book Company, 1985.
- England, Eugene. *Why the Church Is as True as the Gospel*. Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1986.

- Ehrenfeld, David. *The Arrogance of Humanism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1981.
- Gilligan, Carol. *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982.
- Kohn, Alfie. *No Contest: The Case Against Competition*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1986.
- Lal, Purushottam. "The Hindu Experience: An Examination of Folklore and Sacred Texts." In *Literature of Belief*, edited by Neal E. Lambert, 91-107. Salt Lake City: Publishers Press, 1981.
- Lundwall, N. B., ed. *A Compilation Containing the Lectures on Faith*. Salt Lake City: n.p., n.d.
- Peck, Scott M. *The People of the Lie*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983.
- Schneidau, Herbert N. "Biblical Style and Western Literature." In *Literature of Belief*, edited by Neal E. Lambert, 19-37. Salt Lake City: Publishers Press, 1981.
- Seely, John R., R. Alexander Sim, and Elizabeth Loosely. *Crestwood Heights: A Study of the Culture of Suburban Life*. New York: Basic, 1956.
- Toscano, Margaret Merrill. "Sex Roles: Insights from Myth and Scripture." Unpublished paper, 1985. Copy in author's possession.
- Vance, John J., and Bert O. Richmond. "Cooperative and Competitive Behavior as a Function of Self-Esteem." *Psychology in the Schools* 12 (1975): 225-59.
- Wolf, Fred Alan. *Taking the Quantum Leap*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981.