

Bearing Your Sanctimony: Monologues on Dialogue

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IN THE UNABRIDGED WEBSTER'S, "DIALOGUE" is listed first as "talking together in conversation." That seems harmless enough, but the second definition is frankly a nest of thorns: "interchange and discussion of ideas," it says, "especially when open and frank, as in seeking mutual understanding or harmony." Now I will concede a certain idealism at work in that definition, yet it does not describe a natural human behavior. As Americans and Mormons, we believe in freedom of speech, but also and no less in truth that prevails, and in not suffering nay-sayers or fools, and, if we've listened to our mothers and file leaders, in saying something positive and faith affirming or not saying anything at all. We also believe there are some things that should not even be thought. It is not easy in discussion to endure someone enfranchised, as we are, to say what is right, who does not. This makes dialogue hard.

In 1980 when *Exponent II* was still a very new publication, my wife volunteered to edit a Kirtland edition in honor of the sesquicentennial of the founding of the church. Then she set about with a will to mine the considerable knowledge of local sisters about history and folklore, architecture and crafts, about the Shakers and the Amish and the Reorganized Mormons in the area, and especially about recent re-invigoration of the church and its program in Kirtland. She held meetings, passed out recent copies of the *Exponent*, explained the enterprise, its commemorative, non-controversial purpose, the publication, its sponsors. Almost everywhere she met enthusiastic ideas and promises of articles.

Still, as deadlines approached, she found, as editors always find, that promises are slender reeds. She besieged the telephone, becoming cheerleader, counselor, tutor, and nag. She extended deadlines, dogged the mails, offered to type, to punctuate, to ghost write altogether, but she ultimately achieved a response rate significantly lower than that for cold calling or junk mail. She and the few close friends who had proposed the

Kirtland issue had also to research and write most of it themselves. Hard work and hard lessons, but unlike the Little Red Hen, they remained eager to share the quite stunning product with everyone, even those who hadn't found time or energy to help.

They gave copies to local sisters and offered to set out free copies on the "crafts and talents" displays at the stake women's conference. "I'm sorry," was the answer, "there's just no space." Well, could they have just a minute on the program to announce the publication, brag about it, and tell how to get a free copy? "I'm sorry," was the answer, "there's just no time." But the conference display tables turned up kind of barren, and the conference agenda turned out kind of thin. And when, in fact, the Regional Representative delayed the conference over half an hour, leaving more than two hundred assembled women to practice hymns and grudging patience while he squired their principal speaker around Kirtland's historical sights, my wife found it a little difficult to remain circumspect. Why can't they give us a couple of minutes at the microphone, she murmured, a couple of square feet on that table? Then a sister from our own ward, a stake Relief Society officer, turned and drew back the veil. "You shouldn't be surprised," she said matter-of-factly. "They told us all a long time ago that this publication of yours was not appropriate for faithful Latter-day Saints."

"Well," my wife countered, and like most telling rebuttals, this one was delivered too late and at home to an innocent audience. "They didn't tell me!" And, of course, no one had. No woman with whom she'd encouraged, challenged, dickered, or brainstormed had admitted that she did not intend to write. Nor suggested why she might not want to. No official had warned or admonished her. No one raised challenges, questions, objections, or doubts. No one had ever been less than polite, encouraging, apologetic, and, yes, even cordially deceitful. She had been beautifully submarined, and submarining is the canniest military art: silent, subsurface, lethal.

Like most households, ours has had rules governing dialogue. We had a lot of children so we needed a lot of rules. In addition to the usual bans on expletives profane, expletives scatological, and expletives insulting, we also proscribed the use of "shut up." "There is not one shy person in our family," our oldest daughter and middlest child once observed, and indeed there is not. We expect people to talk and to keep on talking even if they don't much feel like it. Sulking, for example, is forbidden: no one is allowed to sit in stony silence nursing a slight. At the same time, there are strictly enforced guidelines covering combative and martyred discourse. We also require that dialogue reach an actual conclusion. For instance, no one may begin telling a story, think better of it, and then refuse to finish.

We have banned sanctimony at the dinner table. In our kitchen and dining

room, commentary on anyone else's food is not allowed. No "Have you noticed that peach in your bowl looks exactly like an eyeball?" nor wondering out loud if the milk is actually fresh. No sanctimonious vegetarian references to the entree as "Bambi" or "dead cow." No cackling, wing-flapping struts around the kitchen. No speculative calorie or fat gram counts nor predictions on the need for angioplasty. The rule that has evolved (and I recommend it to you) is this: "You don't have to like it and you don't have to eat it, but you don't get to talk about it."

Because we are both teachers of language, we set our children early on the straight and narrow path to standard English. We warned them against splitting infinitives and advised against ending sentences with prepositions. They received improving lectures on the correct use of the nominative pronoun, the need for the subjunctive mood, and the preferred past participle form of quite a number of verbs they may never actually need. Recently our daughter reported that a boy in her high school choir had been paying attention to her. He wasn't particularly cute, she said, but, "You and Dad would like him. He has great grammar. He knows the difference between 'lay' and 'lie.' We have sometimes worried that we might be overwhelming and repressing our children with all this attention to acceptable discourse, but our fears were recently laid to rest. When our youngest daughter squared off with us and asked, "Does 'anal-retentive' require a hyphen?" we knew we had been on the right track all along.

Not long ago we were at a restaurant with our two youngest children. We were catching up. Our son had been away most of the summer in Wisconsin, where it seemed he had a girlfriend. This was news, and his mother, like any mother was all inquiry. What was she like? Was she in school? Where was she from? How had he met her? And so on and on. He answered stingily, relishing her unleashed curiosity and his own control over the information, until she asked about religion. Suddenly he bristled over his soup.

"Why do you want to know that?"

"I don't know," she lied. "I was just interested."

"Yeah, right," he said, "you just want to know if she's Mormon, like if she's not Mormon, she doesn't count. She couldn't possibly be a good person if she wasn't a member of the Mormon church."

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to. I know how you think."

"It's not true," his mother protested, but he didn't believe her for a minute. We ate in silence until she changed the subject. "How's your schedule, dear?" She turned to his younger sister.

"I've got to get to bed. I've got Seminary in the morning."

"And what are you guys studying?" I asked.

"You know what we're studying, Dad, the *Doctrine and Covenants*."

"I mean, specifically, what are you studying right now?"

"Tomorrow, we're just supposed to make a list."

"A list?"

"Qualities, like things you want in the person you marry."

"Oh," her mother perked up. "Have you already decided what's going on your list?"

"It's not MY list," was the answer.

"What do you mean?"

"We're making it together."

"You mean you're making one list for everyone?"

Alexis nodded, "So?"

"One list fits all?"

"What's wrong with that?"

"I don't know, it just seems maybe a little monolithic."

Alexis turned on her mother. "It's not either. It's not some plot. You are just always trying to find something bad to say about the church."

"What? I didn't say anything bad, I just said it seemed..."

"You said 'monolithic,' Mom. You think I don't know what that means?" She excused herself to stomp off to the restroom. When she returned, we were eating in uneasy stillness again, a cease fire, a demilitarized zone. But we are not naturally still people. After a while talk erupted again, talk about pasta and cajun chicken, the equivocal virtues of squash, and about apple vs. chocolate deserts. Before we finished our meal, we were laughing.

My wife and I were with children we adore, and who love and please us in return, whom we know like our own palms, whom we could not wish anything but well, and all of us were talking together and laughing in conversation. We were not, however, engaged in an interchange and discussion of ideas; we were not altogether open and frank in service of understanding and harmony. And why not? Because even (or perhaps especially) among people who matter to one another, dialogue is hard, is fraught with snares and complications, is a risky and dangerous business.

This story goes back to when I started writing. My visiting teacher had dropped by and was dumbfounded to find me putting up new wallpaper in my kitchen. She didn't know that mere mortals put up wallpaper, that it didn't require a certificate from wallpaper school or a union card. She mentioned that her kitchen really needed a lift, so I offered to help her wallpaper there. The work went slowly, but we were pleased with the results and having fun when suddenly something happened that would change my life. Somewhere between hanging the plumb line and applying the seam roller, she mentioned casually that she had published a couple of articles in The Ensign. I nearly dropped the roll of paper I was holding. I had no idea that mere mortals could write articles for The Ensign. I think I thought you had to be set apart or maybe related to a general authority. My visiting teacher actually was related to a general authority, but she

said that had nothing to do with it. You just wrote something and mailed it in, and a few weeks later the editor would write you a nice letter, thanking you, and would send you a check. A check! I was beside myself. A person could get paid to do this? I couldn't wait to get home to my typewriter. I had four or five ideas knocking around in my mind that I'd pretty much planned to use in a sacrament meeting talk or maybe a Relief Society lesson, but now these great ideas would become published articles in the official church magazine. All my friends would see my name in print and they would marvel.

I wrote, in very short order, three articles and two short stories, exhausting every idea I had, and all but one of these submissions were, in fact, accepted for publication. Moreover, I was paid for my efforts. The first check was, as I recall, for \$23.85. I stood by the mailbox and screamed and one of my neighbors thought someone had died. But I was just breaking into print and helping to build the kingdom for cash with my good advice on effective living and I was very excited about this. I was, after all, about twenty-six, had two tiny children, and knew practically everything.

One article was about getting started with home storage (a very big deal at the time). Another piece exhorted parents not only to teach reverence, but aimed at convincing them that children could be taught to enjoy and appreciate sacrament meeting. Pretty heady stuff it seems to me now, but at the time I was un-abashed.

I learned a few things from publishing those two articles. Mainly I learned that seeing your words in print can be a very mixed blessing—especially after some nameless, faceless editor you have never met or talked to makes certain unconscionable changes. I read with horror the mangled version of my first masterpiece as it appeared in *The Ensign* several months later. And I developed an intense dislike for editors, who were evidently ruthless, power-hungry people with blue pencils who made perfectly unnecessary changes in perfectly good copy just to show who was in charge.

I further discovered that once a piece of writing has been typeset and several hundred thousand copies are in the mail, there is no going back. All you can do is hope that none of your friends will see it and think you actually wrote those inane words that you now see before you in black and white.

The last article I had submitted was even preachier than the rest. It was called "On Getting Off to Church on Time" and was full of practical suggestions for Sunday morning organization and timely reminders that inattention to the published timetable of any meeting was unspeakably rude, that punctuality was a desirable quality for one to develop, that it was, in fact, probably a prerequisite for celestial glory. I used the example of the angel sent to stay Abraham's hand when he was on the mountain top with Isaac. What if that angel had been even a minute late? Hmmm? What then?

And the *Ensign* had bought this article too, but unlike the pattern that had established itself with the previous submissions, months passed and then years, and it never appeared. For a while I wondered about it and kind of looked for it,

but then the editorship of the church magazines changed hands, and I assumed it would likely never be used. It was really just as well; I had the \$21.00. Besides, I reluctantly admitted to myself, my life had changed a bit. Where before I had been married to a very punctual businessman in pinstripes, now my husband was a laid-back college professor in khakis whose sense of time allowed a substantial margin of error of minus twenty minutes. By this time, I had also acquired several more children. The six or seven or eight or ten of us weren't exactly famous for getting anywhere on time, Sunday meetings not excepted.

Then, one day the article appeared with no warning over my previous married name in a section of *The Ensign* called "Random Sampler." My subscription, however, had lapsed, and I was unaware of this fact. There had been a death in our ward and there was a funeral scheduled. I had been running a little late and had been stopped by the police for speeding. But I got to the service before my husband while the prelude music was still pulsating through an unnaturally somber congregation. And I suppose some comic relief was helpful. I suppose that I should be grateful I was able to provide it for so many people. When the service was over, we stood patiently in a very long line that snaked its way from the chapel through the foyer, down one hallway, and across another to the Relief Society room where the family waited to be consoled. That was where a stealth-detective reader of *The Ensign* passed around her current issue with the offending article well marked and a note at the bottom that "our own Rebecca Chandler" was, in fact, the author and just look what Rebecca was advocating. Ten years, another husband, and five or six children after the fact, I was in no position to be sanctimonious about getting off to church or anywhere else on time as the congregation well knew. It was very entertaining, I am sure.

That was when I learned that there are worse things than an editor's mangling something you've written. There are worse things than not being published at all.

As an undergraduate German major, I took my first classes from a terribly proper, terribly pedantic, terribly Swiss professor who ran his classes with military discipline. He lectured without discussion, buried us in reading and information, bellowed out loudly at latecomers and the unprepared. He scared us to death. And I loved it all, loved it with a masochist's affection, took endless notes, studied late and early for exams. But soon I had to dampen my vocal enthusiasm for this teacher, to which older students and certain younger professors responded with rolled eyes. The man, they explained, was a dinosaur, an adherent of the old historical/biographical school of criticism, which New Critics considered as relevant to literature as alchemy to chemistry or phrenology to medical science. It might have a quaint appeal for some, but was a waste of time. Unlike many, I continued to take his classes, but was wary now. And the pressure seemed to get to him as well. He changed his method and pedagogy, adopting a more fashionable approach. After one such

course, he called me into his office and asked me what I thought. I told him what I would not have told my fellow students. It was okay, I said, but I liked the old way better. "So do I," he replied, confirming what was already evident in his class. His heart was not in this change. He looked forlorn in his fastidious suit and stiff collar. He was an older bachelor and teaching was his life, and we will not know how he would have weathered this difficulty. He died the following summer. It was an unpleasant death, but in some ways seems gentler than the erosion of his reputation and life's work taking place among colleagues and students at the university.

I tell you this in part so that I can tell you that I am often amazed at how much of what I learned in those early classes has stayed with me, how often as a teacher I have without attribution quoted this man, told stories or recounted background drilled into me by a dinosaurian pedant, and how much of the genuine pleasure I get out of what I do is rooted in that experience. But this does not mean that I became an adherent of the historical/biographical method. The truth is that almost all of my teachers were or would have been his critics. And I was very careful, thereafter, to keep up, to make sure my mentors were fashionable. I avoided the dinosaurs and cultivated the bright young turks. I knew who was in power and who was ascending. I stayed on top of things, gave advice. But when I went off for two years to a German university, suddenly and terribly, I found myself in an old predicament. My German professors knew about American New Criticism and thought it interesting, but also narrow and often irrelevant.

This was the late sixties and German scholars were exploring the social and political and philosophical dimensions of literature. Once again I learned new approaches and truly relevant methods that would make my labors respectable: structuralism, literary sociology, reader response theory, and more. I worked hard to master the new questions, to acquire the right answers, and, when after two years I returned to finish graduate school in the United States, I reported with enthusiasm and not a little pride to fellow students what I had been learning. Some, however, listened with narrowing eyes. Word got around that evidently I'd become a Communist. And, indeed, the first grade I got on a paper there was just such a grade as a Communist might well expect to get at a real American university. Some approaches to literature were respectable. Some were not. And you mustn't think this lesson was lost on me. I quite quickly recovered what I had unlearned in Europe, returned to former orthodoxies, and graduated from that institution with, at least, respectable grades.

I should confess that I loved graduate school or at least am enamored in retrospect. Not all of my teachers were so orthodox, and those who were seemed nonetheless talented at what they did, but it is with no small pleasure I tell you that if you went there today, you would doubt-

less discover the latest turks in charge or ascending to be talented women and men who look back on my teachers' critical orthodoxies with indulgent smiles. They see such scholarship as an historical artifact with quaintly restrictive methods and value horizons. They, by contrast, bring productive social, political, and philosophical perspectives to the study of literature and make very certain their students do so as well. These are feminist scholars and/or deconstructionists, reader response theorists, and not least of all the "New Historians," who have put a contemporary face onto that old dinosaur, the historical/biographical method, and brought it back into the classroom with a vengeance. And oh, how I wish my disheartened Swiss professor were there to see it.

In a little book I am fond of, entitled "Confessions of an American Scholar," Simon O'Toole writes the following: "In a moment of modesty the American scholar will concede that much of what is written is misguided and incomplete. He is as ready as the next (person) to take a long historical view and admit that the truths of today may be the follies of tomorrow. But his heart isn't in it, for he knows that there is indeed truth to be arrived at . . . I myself," O'Toole continues, "did a lot of scholarship in the name of truth, and it was all lies."

Of course, what else would you expect from the wisdom of men, the arm of flesh, the intellect without spirit? The really great thing about religion, when you've really got religion, is that it puts the shifting sands of human reason behind you. That was once made clear to me by my home teacher. He is a convert to the church and worried, I think, about my prospects for salvation. He's sure I don't cherish my Mormonism as he does and as I would if, like him, before coming to Mormonism I had had to put up with other churches. The thing that really made him crazy was the way they kept changing everything. Was nothing sacred? After all, God's truths don't evolve or adjust to the times. They are the same yesterday, today, tomorrow, and forever. He had chapter and verse on that. And that's why he'd become a Mormon. In Mormonism, at least, nothing changes.

"Oh," I said. And though I am doubtless incorrigible, I did not bring up speaking in tongues, nor plural marriage, nor the law of consecration, nor certain ceremonial oaths, nor Adam/God, nor any of a number of other true and everlasting principles. I only mentioned the prohibition of the priesthood to black men.

"The what?" he replied.

I had to explain. He'd joined the church in the 80's, and he had never heard of this. It wasn't in the scriptures. It certainly wasn't in the manuals. He blinked and looked at me strangely.

"They couldn't hold the priesthood?" he said.

I nodded confirmation.

It was a moment before he spoke again. "Well, that was obviously wrong," he allowed, and then he recovered, "but the thing is, the gospel doesn't change. That's the beautiful thing." We were talking together, in a conversation. We were not in a dialogue.

Not long ago I found myself in Fast and Testimony meeting presided over and conducted by the bishop of the ward who also offered the opening remarks. In his testimony he referred to the recent appearance of our prophet on the "Larry King Live Show." The telecast had been a great source of strength to the bishop because of something President Hinkley had said right at the end almost by chance. "Have you ever doubted the truth of Mormonism?" the host had asked, and the reply, without hesitation, had been an unequivocal, "No." Never. He never had. Never once. He'd always known beyond a shadow of a doubt. The bishop liked that because it made him feel secure in having a prophet, seer, and revelator who didn't know what it was to entertain or harbor a doubt.

But, now that he thought about it, he too had always known. He just hadn't always realized that he knew. Now that he knew he knew, he felt a lot better. And now that he knew he knew, he realized the he had always known, and that made him feel better yet. He went on to refer to a general and undocumented prophecy that seemed to suggest that the last days are immediately at hand and that in the last days there won't be any middle. People will either have to line right up with the prophet or simply be lost. After challenging us to keep that fact in mind, he concluded with a general catalogue of blessings, which included especially his children, who were mostly grown and gone, but who had also been blessed with strong testimonies and who were all living the gospel. He humbly suggested that this happy outcome hadn't been due to anything he had ever done, that his children had simply come to him that way, and he went on to praise his wife and his wife's family. Had he not been placed with his own goodly parents, his in-laws would have been the very next people he would have wanted to share his life with. How blessed he was to have such wonderful people—all of them filled with the desire to serve the Lord—to claim as his own and to be sealed together with through the holy bonds of matrimony for time and all eternity.

The time remaining was remanded to the members of the ward for the bearing of testimonies, provided they could be finished by 1:25 p.m. His comments had set a tone, one that he undoubtedly intended, and one that I'm sure many members of the ward found inspiring. Congregants filed to the front of the room to lean into the microphone and partake of the tissues. The theme of absolute and unconditional certitude held throughout the meeting, even among the primary children, who trotted up the aisle, and the woman who offered her testimony in song. It could be fairly concluded, from what was offered, that virtually everyone in the room was of one mind. Where, indeed, did a panoply of faith such as this leave an erstwhile doubter? I grew restless and began to wish that someone would put in a word of reassurance for anyone there—anyone at all—who might once have entertained a doubt.

I thought it might be helpful if someone would quote Paul on the subject of spiritual gifts to remind folks that faith is, in fact, a gift, and gifts are variously given, that to some is given faith to believe, and to others, it is given to believe on their words. It's okay to be unsure, because what really matters is the way all of these gifts of God work to benefit the entire community—that all may be edified. This isn't a competition; it's a congregation. And what better place for us to bring our doubts and our fears as well as our triumphs and sure convictions?

I began to worry that someone in that congregation might not be feeling particularly blessed that day for having been born to his or her parents, that maybe someone did not, in fact, have "goodly" parents and might take that as a referendum on his or her personal worthiness or on how much God valued him or her. I wondered how people there might feel whose children had not kept the faith nor risen up recently to call their parents blessed. Did their lives mean and count so much less because of this failure?

I was afraid that some members of the congregation might take that part about being either on one side or the other, about there not being any middle, as a suggestion that the ward would be better off without them—as an invitation to leave. And I didn't want anyone else to leave. We've had enough of that already. I thought it would be helpful if a former bishop of that ward—and I saw him sitting right there—if he would stand up and tell the congregation something he once told me, personally and off the record, that an enormous amount of what he called the "real work of the ward" was then being done by people who, in his words, "did not have testimonies." He had made it a priority during his tenure to see that these saints continued to feel comfortable enough attending that we wouldn't lose them, wouldn't lose their families, their society, and all that they had to contribute.

I thought it might be reassuring for someone to remind the congregation that every ward in the church has its true believers, its hopeful doubters, and its hangers-on. Some wards can count on a loyal opposition, on a few "Oxymormons." And that's fine—as long as we support each other. Some people move over time or in response to changing circumstances in their lives from category to category; others have children who turn out to be in categories different from their own. That too is fine as long as the general direction is toward a community in Christ.

When Christ issued his invitation, "Come unto me," it came without strings attached. It included all of us, as in every one of us, and it would seem also that it included all of us, as in every part of us—our doubts and misgivings, our troubles and failures, too. What matters is that we stay together and help each other through.

I thought someone should say some of those things. But no one did. Not even me. And the testimonies did conclude promptly at 1:25.

Right now I teach workshops for writers. Such courses are taught a little differently. They are not just discussions. They are certainly not lectures. The student delivers his or her manuscript in advance to be read carefully by class members, and then after the reading, there is a discussion, in fact, a dialogue of sorts. But without further input from the writer than what is already on paper. He or she is present, but, except for questions or a brief statement at the very end, is not allowed to talk. No explanations nor exhortations to right thinking as in: "No, that's not right; that's not what it means." You can't, I remind them, follow your book around to police your readers and set them straight. So the writer must pay attention, must take notes, but is forbidden to talk.

The workshop is a kind of test market with a targeted demographic of serious, invested readers. As a focus group it is ideal for telling you as a writer, not what you'd intended, but what, in fact, you have managed or not managed to communicate. It is also completely terrifying. Partly, this is so because when people write seriously, staying up late and long to agonize over the right word, the right image, the right thought, there is more than just seriousness on the line. They have been locked into a bruising struggle, and now, on top of that, must face critics. And a critic, as a writer friend once explained, is someone who walks out onto the battlefield after the battle is over to shoot the wounded.

So why does anyone consent to this? Why is my workshop, why are most such workshops, full of writers? In large part, it is because such classes actually help. They make a difference. Writers who learn to use them and to revise their work get better. And this is so, not least of all, because of the workshop rules, which are, in a way, the difficult and necessary rules of all serious dialogue. They require a willing and very risky submission to scrutiny. Your words are on the table, and now you must listen, must hear not only about their strengths, but about their weaknesses, their fuzziness, their contrivance and preachiness, their lapses and abuses, their surrenders to bad logic and bad taste. What to a writer could be more useful or more harrowing? What could be more harrowing or more useful to any advocate of sincerely held convictions? It's hard, unnatural work, but also, I think, the work of angels.