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BEYOND TEACHING CORRECT PRINCIPLES

(Some Thoughts on Mormon Youth and the Development of Free Agency)

Grant Owen, BS*

Abstract

It is alleged that families that have not made adequate preparation for coping with the developing agency of their teenage children seek to contain that growth. As in other religious families under similar stress, LDS parents may attempt to enhance their power and credibility by aligning their authority with that of the church. The natural movement of the adolescent away from parental control may thus be complicated and result in the unnecessary disruption of church ties as well as familial bonds by the confused and frustrated youth. Measures intended to foster parental confidence and adolescent competence are discussed.

Recently a colleague was describing his experiences with behaviour modification in a juvenile detention centre in California. To illustrate a point, he related the case of a girl who was "acting out" in her locked room after lights out. She was screaming and banging on the walls and door with seemingly indefatigable energy, as was her evening ritual. After some time, when it seemed that she could go on all night, my colleague intervened. Talking to the girl through the door, he informed her that he and some of the other staff members on duty had taken bets among themselves on how long she could carry on her disturbing behaviour. One of the staff, she was told, had bet five dollars that she would only last another five minutes. Another was said to have bet that she would last at least another twenty minutes and my colleague told her he was sure she could carry on for another hour or even more! "She just couldn't win!", he explained to me to drive him the point. "No matter whether she stopped her tantrum immediately or continued all night, she was going to lose." Predictably, her behaviour subsided. She was thoroughly defeated.

Developing Agency

The development of free agency, a fundamental purpose of our mortal sojourn, involves a gradual progression from external control by parents and other authority figures, such as local church leaders, to internal control founded upon responsible decision-making in the light of personal revelation. As a consequence of this process the families of many teenage children experience turbulence in intra-family relationships. Parents and church leaders may facilitate or constrain this development depending upon the quality of the preparation they give the child, and their readiness to allow the child to make its own decisions as it is able.

Sadly, from time to time we find that some LDS parents (like many others) try to control their children with the same cold-blooded methods as described in the anecdote above. Frightened by the growing independence of their teenagers and reluctant to face the prospect of no longer controlling them, they attempt to increase control, often

regardless of the cost to the relationship or to the self-esteem of the child. Ignoring in their anxiety such constraints on the exercise of power as are outlined in D&C 121, they trespass into the realms of "unrighteous dominion." As in the illustration above, the issue of control becomes paramount and eclipses concerns about the welfare of the youth. Although my colleague's intervention silenced the young girl's inappropriate behaviour it was at the expense of her self-esteem and emotional well-being. In a troubled family setting, where controls are merely more subtle, parents may discover that their usual methods of exercising control no longer impress their growing teenager, and equally desperate measures may be called for. One such measure, for example, is to enlist the aid of the church. This may be done by putting their demands in terms that suggest they are also the wishes of the church. It is a powerful technique because after all, it is one thing to disagree with your parents' taste in music, but if your preferences are labeled "evil" instead of just "unpleasant" then listening to it becomes an act of rebellion against God, rather than merely reflecting a difference of opinion between His children. (This is not to discredit the caring parent who warns against or even forbids some types of irreverent music. The distinction is in the motive and methods used). The challenge of the concerned parent or leader is to begin preparation for adult responsibility from an early age so that the youth is adequately experienced and equipped to successfully face life's decisions alone when the time comes. Paraphrasing the Prophet Joseph Smith, our job is to teach them correct principles and then let them govern themselves.

The Necessity of Real Choice

One of the purposes of our mortal probation is to enable us to obtain, and then learn to correctly exercise, the agency which God gave to Adam in Eden. It follows then that in order for a young man or woman to optimally develop and use the agency they have been given, as God does, there must be significant, meaningful choices upon which they can "cut their teeth." Such choices are many and varied. Choices regarding education, sport, family relations and Church participation, for example, all play important parts

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in the life of LDS teenagers. A meaningful choice implies among other things, control of the outcomes and responsibility for the consequences. If, as often happens, parents protect their young children from the natural or logical consequences of their decisions they may find they have produced teenagers who lack the ability to accurately assess the probable outcomes of their decisions. Allowing children to discover the natural consequences of their actions will encourage them to exercise the skills of sound decision-making (Dreikurs & Soltz, 1972, pp. 70-78).

The many choices we encounter in daily life vary in terms of their consequences. Some choices, while meeting the above criteria of control and responsibility, may have serious consequences but do not involve any inherent dangers. Examples include whether to take statistics or biology, to play basketball or to swim or whether to date this young woman or that one (or both). Some choices do not involve moral danger but have an element of physical risk. This type of choice is encountered in competitive sports and especially outdoors when the young person's skill is pitted against nature. It is widely acknowledged that such situations play a very significant role in the maturation process. The Scouting Movement is a testimony to that belief. Here again the extent to which the young person can expect to experience the full consequences of his or her decision and the importance of the consequences are measures of the value of the challenge to that young person. We may contrive situations that appear challenging but unless real consequences flow from the decisions, the experience of making them will be a hollow one; like merely playing at being adults.

A third category includes choices which provide among the alternatives an element of moral or spiritual danger. The choice regarding missionary service, the Word of Wisdom, chastity, honesty and so forth fall into this category. It is natural and necessary that the major proportion of teaching in the church, and hopefully in the home, is aimed at this group of choices. However, because of the importance of these choices some parents are afraid to allow their children to face them. They often seem to be under the illusion that they can postpone indefinitely the need for the child to make the decision, or perhaps even make it for them. Virginia Satir has observed that:

The parents of a nurturing family realise that problems will come along, simply because life offers them, but they will be alert to creative solutions for each new problem as it appears. Troubled families, on the other hand, put all their energies into the hopeless attempt to keep problems from happening; when they do happen—and, of course, they always do—these people have no resources left for solving them. (1972, p. 17)

It is unfortunate that we do see such troubled parents and leaders trying to stop problems from happening among young Latter-day Saints. They either try to eliminate the choice, by making it for the young person and attempting to enforce their choice with coercion, or as mentioned, they try to so bias the alternatives that in order to select the undesirable option the youth must, in effect, reject his parents or leaders as well as the alternative they prefer. Young people frequently find that an enormous cost is artificially attached to any deviation from the social norms

of their community. They discover that by means of a mysterious inflationary process, temporary indulgence in a new and outlandish hairstyle or dance may also be interpreted as a rejection of their parents, the Church and democracy.

As a youth visiting the Temple for the the first time in 1972 to be sealed to my parents, I attended a Sunday School class where just such an issue was being discussed. A young priest in the ward, apparently active and committed to the Gospel, had bought a motorcycle—the first one in the community. I came into the picture at the point where his Sunday School teacher had decided to use the lesson period to help the class to see the adult point of view. This was necessary because many parents were strongly objecting to his parents permitting him to have it and were predicting dire consequences in terms of moral deterioration. While parents may have real concerns about such matters, young people will recognise false attempts to make them appear to be moral issues. This reflects a lack of confidence on the part of the parents in the justice of their cause and may promote a confrontive rather than conciliatory atmosphere. In contrast to the experience above, I recall with warm affection a visit to my mission field by one of the Council of Seventy. In passing he mentioned permitting his teenage sons to have longer hair when it was the fashion. He admitted that other parents in the ward disapproved of this, but he permitted it because he knew that they were faithful in the things that counted. He was confident that this concession to peer group standards did not foreshadow abandonment of *all* standards. Presumably he had taught his children correct principles, and being thus prepared (D&C 38:30), was not afraid to gradually permit them to govern themselves.

The Drive for Agency

All attempts to coerce our youth are pitted against the primeval need seated deep within them to exercise their agency. It seems to be the case that the drive toward God-like self-determination will prevail even if, paradoxically, in the exercise of agency we choose to break a commandment. Like Adam and Eve, our youth sometimes find themselves confronted with what appear to be two equally important yet mutually exclusive choices; to experience fully their agency as independent, mature adults and yet simultaneously to give total obedience to an omniscient Father. The answer lies in the sequence. One must precede the other. Hopefully, parental preparation will proceed both.

Next to life, agency is the most important gift of God to man, and consequently is the next greatest gift, after life itself, that we can give to the Father (see Packer, 1971). Recalling that the Saviour's sacrifice of his life had to be a free-will offering in order to have atoning impact, it becomes evident that if our youth are to offer to God their agency (through priesthood service and sacred covenants) it must be a worthy gift, mature and developed, and the giving must reflect that. It cannot be coerced. To give the

Concluded on page 26

Continued from page 22

gift of our agency we must first fully possess it, having paid whatever price is required to effect the purchase. This would appear to be an on-going process of living laws by which we earn some free-agency, consecrating that agency, then living higher laws thereby freeing ourselves from the bonds of ignorance and sin and so increasing our agency, which we then freely consecrate. It is a cycle of growth which becomes accessible to us only when we have the psychological sophistication and spiritual maturity to be able to make the decisions involved. Too often as parents and leaders we try to control the agency of our youth falsely believing we can ensure their destiny in this way. What frequently happens is that in their drive for a fullness of agency our children subconsciously recognise their parents (or an advisor or teacher) as the greatest threat to their continued development and may tear away from them by disobeying and discarding indiscriminately their parents' values. Chidester (1981) suggests that extreme rejection of parental values may often be symptomatic of such a power struggle.

Exercising Faith as Well as Judgement

Somewhere between the extremes of Laissez-Faire and totalitarianism there is a model that parents may follow that will enable them to strike an appropriate balance between parental control and self-determination for our youth. Several programs available to our youth such as Aaronic Priesthood, Young Women's and Scouting give them an opportunity to make important decisions affecting their own welfare and that of others. The structure of these programs ensures that the responsibility is graduated according to the age, experience and ability of the youth. However, there has been recent criticism that the education of our teenagers, especially in regard to activities where there is an element of danger, lacks the challenge and risk that is so important to their development (Mortlock, 1981, Note 1). In our attempts to anticipate and avoid danger to our youth we must be careful that we do not remove the very elements that make the programs valuable. Speaking specifically in defence of educative wilderness programs, Mortlock (1981) extols the virtues of placing young people in stress situations in the outdoors and complains that many contemporary adventure activities are "sterile and spineless." In the church we quite willingly place our young people in the wilderness (actual or metaphorical) in the hope that they will stretch their souls there, but all too often the way has been so painstakingly prepared that very little real challenge remains. The "shadow" of "shadow leadership" becomes an incapacitating darkness as doubting Thomases hover nearby to ensure that no-one stubs their (actual or metaphorical) toe. In such circumstances, failure cannot be private and success is hollow because it is the success of someone else. Under claustrophobic leadership or parenting the youth often feels cheated of the opportunity to freely choose a good act. We are here to prove ourselves; the loss of the opportunity to choose must effect our motivation to try.

Safety precautions and preparation are essential for success in any venture, but we must remember that it is the task, not the accomplishment which provides the growth for our youth. The merit badge is meaningless in itself; it is the earning of it that is of value (see Johnson, 1984). We would do well to more often apply to our youth the principle Elder Boyd K. Packer advocated for newlyweds when he said that though there will undoubtedly be rough patches on the matrimonial road ahead, he would not smooth the way, even if he could, for it is out of the struggles that courage and love come (Packer, 1963). In preparing the experience of mortality for us, it is significant that provision was made for us to be temporarily divested of most of the pre-mortal experience and knowledge that would have carried us through this probationary period without any risk at all. Instead, we were left to struggle with what remained. God did not say, "Let us give them a good experience." He said, "... we will prove them herewith, ..." (Abr. 3:25). Recently Elder Carlos Asay alluded to this problem of programs and principles being emphasized to the detriment of the task they are designed to accomplish. He asked, "Is it possible in our drive to perform or fulfill a church expectation we collide with purpose? Can we not become so obsessed with form that we forget family?" (Asay, 1983).

In ministering to the needs of young Latter-day Saints we should recall that Satan's proposal for mortality contained a prohibition not on good behaviour, but on choice. He did not advocate anarchy, but rather a stifling, choiceless conformity. It behooves us then, as those who lead, counsel and raise youth, not to subscribe to a Satanic philosophy under the guise of good intentions by attempting to reduce their choices. The laudable goal of saving all mankind does not excuse the employment of any and all means to do so. Remember that Satan's justification for his draconian plan was also that no-one would be lost, like buried talents (see Matthew 25:14-30). Life will prove far less worrying and infinitely more rewarding if we who are involved with youth direct our energies to teaching correct principles and then exercise our faith and permit our young people to exercise their full potential and govern themselves as their Father intended.

Endnotes

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