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Response: Has the Light of the World Experienced Brownout?

Dennis E. Nelson, PhD

Regretably, Dr. Gleave's manuscript arrived only days prior to my departure for an extended period. Along with the constraint of submission deadlines upon my return, only a few brief comments can be tendered in response.

The similar problems associated with representative government and institutional responsiveness are substantially as Dr. Gleave states them to be. However, I do not believe, as is implied by his statement regarding leader willingness to address membership feedback, that the organizational direction taken by the APA or most other professional groups for that matter is determined foremost by the rather innocent principle of "the squeaky wheel is the one that receives the grease."

Let me reassert here that I do indeed ascribe deliberate ideological intent to most of the policy related decisions of these leaders and governing bodies. Responsiveness to "feedback" is selective, based primarily on liberal litmus tests.

Dr. Gleave's point regarding the "we" versus "they" cognitive framework of much of my discussion has, upon further reflection, more validity than I would have at first perceived. Such a criticism highlights the tendency found in most of us to expect or hope that problems will be resolved by someone outside ourselves. Beyond the choice to get involved on a personal level, his comment also touches directly on a very personal strategic decision. Assuming an individual perceives the existence of some problem which merits a

response, there are those who are likely most effective in working for change through the system or via organized involvement. Others, are better suited or more comfortable operating quite outside the borders of any group effort. History contains sufficient examples of a broad spectrum of styles and approaches in working for change. Withdrawal, organized refusal to respond, protests by a group or by an individual, and many other strategies can be appropriate depending on the nature of the circumstances and of the aggrieved parties.

More implied than openly broached by Dr. Gleave is the criticism that I expect from AMCAP what I condemn in other professional groups, namely advocacy. Under duress, I confess there to be some truth in that indictment. It is so because of a lingering idealistic view of AMCAP. Let it be clear that I would have no quarrel with an AMCAP that followed the model of a traditional professional organization as outlined in my original paper. Yet, the idealistic portion of my heart yearns for the possibility that any organization composed primarily of LDS men and women could be something different, something more than merely a junior clone of so many groups available in the world at large.

If it is not, is it worthwhile? If the AMCAP membership is composed of individuals who are primarily therapists, or psychologists, or medical practitioners, then organizing seems redundant, except for social purposes. It is due to just such reasoning that I opposed the adoption of an AMCAP ethics code. It appears to be only another outward sign of legitimacy in comparison to other worldly organizations, rather than reflecting the uniqueness of its memberships presumably shared commitment.

Perhaps whatever binds AMCAP members together is not nearly as unique as I would prefer to believe. There may be no concrete realities to which the vast bulk of AMCAP members are anchored. If so, the salt is quickly losing its savor. Let me not be misunderstood. It is not totally unified, lock-step thinking and direction that I anticipate. But as programs, policies, and directions are proposed, and as problems are analyzed, there are correct principles that can be applied, and values consonant with the gospel that can be brought to bear in the process. If we wish to ignore such realities

it is within our agency to do so. However, if we so choose, then in my view, most of the justification for AMCAP itself fades from view.

As underdeveloped countries ape the West, much that is culturally distinctive disappears, and many of the remaining differences coalesce around the trivial. As ethnic groups become assimilated, valuable parts of their original identity can be exchanged for hollow practices, organizations, and entities that are in reality only imitations of their dominant culture counterparts, with ethnic facades or labels.

Institutions of all kinds can suffer a similar fate. Perhaps a once “peculiar people” have found acceptance and success sufficient to diffuse their light or worse. The LDS subculture has its sports stars, business giants, artists, and politicians. Do they really differ in any meaningful way from the comparable icons of the world at large? Some might say that the distinctive “community” of the saints no longer exists. Others might assert that even LDS theology gets more bland, and less distinctive each decade. Is AMCAP just another professional group whose membership happens to contain a high percentage of individuals whose names are found for one reason or another on the rolls of a particular religious institution? Is Zion in a state of brownout?

Perhaps it is vain to expect light to emanate from any organized group or institution. As Dr. Gleave reminds us, there is indeed a sifting process underway. Might it be that such a process requires a context wherein every man walks after his own God? Under such conditions, light would surely be scattered, refracted, and rarely if ever widely acknowledged. Its brightest and most resplendent rays would be encountered not in the doings of any structured group or official association, but rather in the lives of a relatively few individual souls. Each in his or her own way would be offering every other person they rub shoulders with an opportunity to ignite yet another spark.