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Dealing with Fear and Depression in a 21st-Century Context

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Therapy in the 21st century cannot be guided solely by attention to intra-psychic or intra-familial factors. As the surrounding social and cultural environment continues to become more unstable, threatening, and dangerous, fear and depression become increasingly common, reality-based responses. These responses are not a surprise to those acquainted with ancient and modern scriptures, which predict times of unprecedented trouble with accompanying widespread terror and despair; and which also identify a clear and peaceful path through such troubles. This paper examines socio-cultural forces which continue to exacerbate the fear and depression problems of our time, as well as the cognitive underpinnings of these destructive forces. It identifies an alternative, more healthful response to the context of our current social environment. Finally, it articulates what AMCAP and its individual members can do to "publish peace" in these times of unprecedented and ever-escalating cultural turmoil.

For over twenty-five years, AMCAP has stood as a refuge from the storm for its members. "Mormon counselors and psychotherapists" have gathered at conventions to share their ideas about how to help others with methods and principles consistent with the restored Gospel of Jesus Christ. In a profession that has long minimized the importance or validity of spirituality in human life, AMCAP members have sustained and encouraged each other in the development and application of techniques that meet a high standard of both spiritual and professional excellence. Many of these ideas have been published in the AMCAP Journal, recorded on convention tapes, discussed in regional areas, and applied in hundreds of clinical practices and mental health settings throughout the world.

After this quarter-century of discussion, mutual support, and development of ideas and techniques, it is time to gather, synthesize, and share what we have learned. In the midst of a secular storm that blusters not only through our profession, but increasingly throughout every dimension of our culture, reaching every age group and segment of population, the need to expand the influence and extend the reach of the refuge we enjoy becomes ever more urgent.

AMCAP members are, by definition, professional helpers - people that others turn to in times of trouble. Hundreds of AMCAP members serve thousands of

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individuals and families in many nations. But in a world increasingly troubled and full of commotion, the need to communicate pure and healing ideas to larger numbers of people becomes increasingly important.

We may never see the faces of those who most need what we have – LDS therapists hungry for peer support but living in remote areas where they can never attend an AMCAP convention; religiously-minded counseling students seeking a spiritual anchor in their training; bishops and other Church leaders the world over who must provide needed counsel on increasingly complex and delicate topics; and troubled people of all genders, ages, and in many locations seeking to find wise and dependable answers to their problems. What AMCAP members enjoy has a far wider potential application and relevance than may have been previously supposed:

For there are many yet on the earth among all sects, parties, and denominations, who are blinded by the subtle craftiness of men, whereby they lie in wait to deceive, and who are only kept from the truth because they know not where to find it. (D&C 123:12)

Certainly AMCAP does not, by any means, replace the authoritative voice of the leaders or official publications of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in proclaiming truth. But it can provide a credible, professional “second witness” (D&C 6:28) to the validity and practical helpfulness of principles taught by the Church. We who by virtue of our profession stand as front-line witnesses of pain, and who have front-row seats to the personal tragedies and triumphs of modern individuals and families, have a rare and specialized opportunity to bear witness of truth. For we see as do few others, the devastating consequences of slighting the counsel of the Almighty – just as we are privileged to see, in our daily work, the incomparable preventive and healing power of his instructions, atonement, and other gifts to his children. We see the principles of the gospel at work – not just in our own lives and families, but in those of many others. We see up close the wreckage that results when such principles are disregarded, and replaced with the philosophies of men. Our experience with multiple human situations makes us credible witnesses and commentators about current social problems and their solutions.

Some of us are trained to assemble data from many individuals and situations into thoughtful research, providing needed perspective so that individuals may more effectively make data-driven decisions, rather than be buffalowed by the ever-present propaganda of the “politically correct” media. Some are gifted to articulate theories about human behavior that are consistent with gospel principles, to replace or refine current guiding theories that are inconsistent with those revealed principles. All have something to offer. The time has come to draw all of these gifts together, all of these wonderful insights and applications, to bless and uplift an ever more troubled world.

Twenty-first century tools have been carefully prepared over the last several years to carry out the challenge given by our previous two AMCAP presidents, Dr. Jan Scharman (Scharman, 1999) and Dr. Lane Fischer (Fischer, 1998) to “expand our influence” for good. These tools include an expanded website and this electronically-based AMCAP Journal – tools that will allow AMCAP members to share their ideas – first with one another, then with a broader audience, at a level never previously possible.

At the latter end of these twenty-five-plus years, AMCAP has matured into an organization that is ever more prepared to help nourish a world hungry for dependable truth. And the timing of these developments could not be more appropriate, given the pressing and escalating challenges of the era. Perhaps it could be said of this organization, as of many individual Latter-day Saints: “Who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” (Esther 4:14).

“FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS”: THE 21ST CENTURY AND THE CURRENT SOCIAL-CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT

In the first quarter-year of the new millennium, AMCAP sponsored a convention (March 29-30, 2001) based on the theme, “When Men’s Hearts Fail Them: Dealing with Fear and Depression.” A professional convention addressing the topic of depression was by no means a unique feature at that time on the mental health landscape. But the addition of “fear” as a topic of discussion was a relatively new idea, one that many AMCAP therapists responded to with a shock of fresh recognition.
But as discussion proceeded, many vague but influential client fears were identified – mothers and fathers fearing for their children in a world of disrupted social values and increasingly pervasive violence; young men and women hesitant to form committed love relationships for fear that they wouldn’t prove permanent after all; couples afraid to bring children into an economically and socially unstable world; youth and children afraid to go to school in the face of increasing school violence; primary and secondary victims of abuse afraid to trust anyone; and among many Latter-day Saint clients, an unsettling fear that all those awful “latter-day” prophecies they had heard throughout their lives might really come true after all – maybe even within their own lifetimes.

Only 19 months later, as this article is being prepared [October 2002], the topic of fear – even of terror – is no longer new, uncommon, or ambiguous. A mere five months after AMCAP’s convention on fear and depression, terrorist attacks fell with sudden ferocity upon New York City and Washington DC. While a horrified nation and world watched, thousands of lives were ended or changed forever. Within a short time, serious economic ramifications became evident, economic conditions that worsened with the revelation of financial misconduct of various major business executives. Stocks dropped; unemployment soared; and the retirement reserves of many evaporated or were greatly diminished, virtually overnight.

A “War on Terrorism” was actively initiated, bringing an unprecedented level of security checks and public vigilance, emphasizing the ever-present possibility of another horrific attack. In recent months, that war on terrorism has escalated into an urgent presidential plea that initiating war in the Middle East is necessary, to eliminate serious dangers from biological, chemical, or even nuclear weapons allegedly being stockpiled and concealed, ready for unexpected strike at any time.

Newspapers are consistently replete with stories of violence and terror. In current headlines, an efficient sniper in the Washington DC area took 13 lives, one by one over three weeks’ time, escaping all detection by authorities throughout that time period, leaving DC residents terrified to even leave their homes and buy groceries. A few months ago, headline stories in Salt Lake City involved two different abductors stealing directly into the homes of local residents, and snatching away young girls, apparently for sexual and violent victimization. One girl has never been found, despite diligent and widespread community search. The other was rescued by a neighbor’s vigilance, but only after suffering significant terror and abuse.

Indeed, daily local and national news is continuously permeated with stories of fear, terror, and varieties of violence including family violence, street violence, school violence, terrorist violence, and the oncoming shadow of war. Not surprisingly, depression and anxiety disorders correspondingly continue to multiply among all age groups, from the very young to the very old. Suicide, addiction, self-injury and turning to pornographic materials are only a few of the methods people sometimes use to cope with this burgeoning stress, bringing in their wake new cycles of pain for themselves and those around them.

In such times, the prophetic words of Elder Ezra Taft Benson, spoken in 1974, ring more true and relevant than ever:

We live in an age when, as the Lord foretold, men’s hearts are failing them, not only physically but in spirit [see D&C 45:26]. Many are giving up heart for the battle of life ... As the showdown between good and evil approaches, with its accompanying trials and desolations, Satan is increasingly striving to overcome the Saints with despair, discouragement, despondency, and depression. Yet, of all people, we as Latter-day Saints should be the most optimistic and the least pessimistic. For while we know that [D&C 1:35-36] “peace shall be taken from the earth, and the devil shall have power over his own dominion,” we are also assured that “the Lord shall have power over his saints, and shall reign in their midst.” (Benson, 1974, p. 65)

The scriptures record Jesus Christ’s prophetic insight into this peculiarly latter-day “heart failure” and its cause: “men’s hearts failing them for fear” (Luke 21:26). They also record his prediction that “Because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold” (JS-Matt. 1:10). Certainly such statements are increasingly descriptive of contemporary culture. In an age of terrorism and violence, of rampant divorce and parental abandonment of children, of pornography and culturally-sanctioned promiscuity, few are confident that they can afford to
open their heart and take a chance on love, tenderness, and emotional vulnerability. So increasingly, it is becoming counter-cultural to care. In many cases, as predicted, the love of many is indeed "waxing cold."

"What's love got to do with it?" a rock star belted out several decades ago (Britten & Lyle, 1984). Simple fulfillment of sexual appetite may seem far less risky than investing in a marital relationship that statistically has a greater than 50% chance of failure. A flickering pornographic image on a computer screen may appear far less dangerous than a real person who may break your heart, take your money, and take your life out of your own exclusive control.

Yet as Jesus affirmed:

The love of many shall wax cold; But he that remaineth steadfast and is not overcome, the same shall be saved ... You shall also hear of wars, and rumors of wars; see that ye be not troubled, for all I have told you must come to pass ... And again, because iniquity shall abound, the love of men shall wax cold; but he that shall not be overcome, the same shall be saved. (JS-Matt. 1:10-11, 23, 30.)

Though paralyzing and unhealthy, there is nothing more natural (Mosiah 3:19) in a chronically and increasingly stressful environment than to become "troubled" — to fear and despair; or to become too battle-weary to continue caring. This cannot be attributed exclusively to individual or genetic pathology — to personal "chemical imbalance" or family "dysfunction."

The broader social environment of the 21st century could easily be described as depressogenic. Pervasive violence and abuse, economic instability, family breakdown, wars and rumors of wars, natural disasters, pornography and other degrading and destructive media, are just a few of the potentially depressing or frightening factors that may surface as everyday elements in 21st-century life and awareness. Concern about such factors is not evidence of mental instability, but of reality-based awareness of outside threats that can strike ever closer to home.

Fear and depression in the 21st century may thus have as much (or more) to do with what is going on in the world as what is going on in the individual psyche or household. Therefore, old therapeutic strategies designed to resolve primarily intrapsychic, biological, or family dysfunctions may be insufficient to meet the demands of a new, larger, more threatening reality. Cognitive restructuring, improved communication skills, psychoanalysis of past events, Prozac or Valium may soften the impact of surrounding circumstances, but they cannot remove the real and present danger inherent in them — or the fear and depression emerging from them.

Social work is traditionally a mental-health discipline with a "person-in-environment focus" (Council on Social Work Education, 1983). The impact of the environment on the individual and his or her level of wellness has long been the object of social workers' attention. Such a perspective can be useful in a contextual assessment such as that being suggested here.

Church leaders and authors in recent years have frequently used the phrase "environment" to describe the spiritual, emotional, and cognitive context of modern life. Their various observations reveal "environmental" challenges in our time that may prove even more dangerous and disabling than the factors already discussed — "spiritual terrorism" that may prove even more destructive than the attacks of September 11.

For while external threats may threaten a sense of physical and economic well-being, internal attacks can erode the very foundations of effective decision-making and emotional and spiritual well-being. Therefore, as the Savior instructed,

Fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul; but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. (Matthew 10:28)

**Cognitive Underpinnings of 21st-Century Fear and Depression**

In assessing and treating individuals, many therapists utilize the insights and treatment strategies of cognitive therapy. It is axiomatic in this type of therapy that distressing feelings and their resulting problem behaviors stem not exclusively from outside events, but from one's internal reaction to them. On an even deeper level, cognitive therapy holds that feelings and behaviors, as well as daily thoughts, are affected by schemas, or deeply-held generalized beliefs, often formed in childhood, which constitute a template for reaction to oneself, the world, and the people in it.
It may be useful to apply a similar model of cognitive assessment to broad cultural trends that are influencing large numbers of individuals and families. If many in the culture are struggling with depression, fear, anger, impulse control, or other factors seen in modern society and clinical settings, perhaps the problem is not exclusively the troubling circumstances or events of modern life (serious as they are), but rather the cognitive mindset with which the culture has socialized people to interpret these events. And as in individualized cognitive therapy, if consistent patterns of thought can be identified which contribute to dis-ease and dysfunction, then replacement of those thought patterns may facilitate a more healthful response in both emotion and behavior.

Are there “cultural thought patterns” that affect, on a macro level, the individual beliefs and behavioral responses of people on a micro level? In an age of pervasive mass media, sharing ideas and views (whether healthy or unhealthy) is possible to an extent and breadth never dreamed of before. A book written in 1972 by a prominent journalist, Robert Stein, was insightfully titled Media Power: Who is Shaping Your Picture of the World? Stein observes:

The subject of this book is the picture of the world that you and I carry around in our heads: who puts it there, why, how and under what conditions.

Beyond our limited daily experience, it is television, radio, newspapers, magazines and books – the media – that furnish our consciousness with the people, places and events that we agree to call reality. But reality, in a literal sense, is what happens to three and a half billion people all over the world twenty-four hours a day. Out of that teeming experience, the media can only give us, in words and pictures, a representation of tiny fragments that are deemed significant...

By shaping our picture of the world on an almost minute-to-minute basis, the media now largely determine what we think, how we feel and what we do about our social and political environment. (Stein, 1972, xi-xii)

Stein's point is well taken. Out of literally billions of people, situations, and places in the world, taking place minute by minute and hour by hour, the media turns its powerful lens on only a miniscule portion of the total human experience. And indeed, to do otherwise would be impossible. Media is a finite medium, able to focus only on one image at a time, in a finite number of minutes, hours, and seconds. The question is – who selects what is to be portrayed, and why? How are events deemed “significant” or not? What is the standard by which one situation or message is chosen over another?

Knowing that only one segment of “reality” can be presented, out of billions of possible alternatives, and that only one interpretation of that chosen “reality” can be presented at a time, media programming should be regarded as a social responsibility of paramount importance. That selected and edited picture of “reality” goes to a mass audience consisting not only of experienced and thoughtful adults, but of impressionable youth and children just beginning to form their cognitive template of the world. Therapist and anthropologist Mary Pipher has observed:

We must remember that all television [and one could argue, all media] is educational. It teaches values and behavior. Children are manipulated from the time they can sit in front of a television... In the last decades of our century, for the first time since the 1500’s, children have access to the same information that adults have... Children are not sheltered from what has been considered for hundreds of years to be adult material. (Pipher, 1996, pp. 14-17)

Of course, this opportunity to influence the beliefs and behaviors of many, including children, has not always been used responsibly or wisely by media producers. One author observes the following about media content and its effect on audiences:

It is not really new or profound to point out that television executives have for years claimed that they are not capable of influencing our actions or changing behavior, but for decades America's major corporations have paid them billions of dollars for a paltry few seconds or a minute to do just that. To sponsors, media executives claim that just a few well-placed seconds can control how America will spend its hard-earned money. But to Congress and other watch-dog agencies they argue that they are not responsible for causing viewers to change the way they will respond to any emotionally charged, potentially violent circumstance
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that they may subsequently find themselves in. This in spite of the fact that, as of 1994, there have been more than two hundred studies demonstrating the correlation between television and violence. (Grossman, 1995, p. 328)

This author, Colonel David A. Grossman PhD, self-described as "a psychologist who is also a historian and a career soldier" (Grossman, 1995, p. 253), paints a sobering picture in his book On Killing. Grossman relates that in World War II and every previous war, the firing rate of soldiers (the percentage of soldiers who actually shot and killed enemy soldiers) was about 15-20%. This low percentage was due to the natural (and psychologically healthy) reluctance human beings have to taking other human lives.

So to increase the percentages and create more effective, lethal soldiers, military training was adapted to dehumanize the enemy and desensitize soldiers to the reality of killing. Rather than traditional bulls-eye targets (which look nothing like people), soldiers were trained to fire on increasingly realistic human-shaped targets. These were created from various materials - cardboard, balloons - even milk bottles filled with red paint, producing a realistic effect when they were shattered by gunfire, emulating human dismemberment. The soldiers (most often impressionable teenagers) received strong verbal and physical reinforcement for their success in destroying these human-like targets.

Meanwhile, soldiers were also taught to dehumanize the enemy through focusing on a specific body part as a target (such as above the right eye), and through repeated propaganda characterizing the enemy as dangerous, sub-human, and deserving of violence. These methods produced a remarkable improvement in the firing rate - up to 95% in the Vietnam War, as killing became literally instinctual under threat of attack.

Grossman emphasizes that such soldiers have not proved any threat to society upon their return, as they are specifically trained to fire only under authority of a commanding officer - an extremely important limitation. He notes that police officers and professional snipers are now typically trained with these same methods, including that same crucial limitation - firing only under authority.

Grossman then describes how these incredibly effective methods of conditioning people to kill have been replicated in the mass media, particularly through television, movies, and interactive video games, which are as available to children as they are to adults. These elements include:

1. continual exposure to violent scenes that desensitize viewers to the human consequences of violence;
2. glorification of violent "heroes" in the movies and on television who resolve their various challenges by gunning down those who oppose them; and
3. reinforcement for participating in violent entertainment, such as the popcorn, candy, and warm presence of a date at a movie, or the escalating numbers on a video arcade scoreboard, garnered for shooting down realistic, human-looking targets - all occurring without the all-important "safety catch" of training to fire only under authority, for lawful purposes.

Grossman notes the impact of classical conditioning, operant conditioning, and social learning in these "training experiences," warning that:

Adolescents in movie theaters across the nation, and watching television at home, are seeing detailed, horrible suffering and killing of human beings, and they are learning to associate this killing and suffering with entertainment, pleasure, their favorite soft drink, their favorite candy bar, and the close, intimate contact of their date ... We do a better job of desensitizing and conditioning our citizens to kill than anything [any military trainer] ever dreamed of. If we had a clear-cut objective of raising a generation of assassins and killers who are unrestrained by either authority or the nature of the victim, it is difficult to imagine how we could do a better job ... How did we become so hardened? The answer to that question is that we, as a society, have become systematically desensitized to the pain and suffering of others ... We are reaching that stage of desensitization at which the inflicting of pain and suffering has become a source of entertainment: vicarious pleasure rather than revulsion. We are learning to kill, and we are learning to like it. (Grossman, 1995, pp. 302, 310-311)

Though this is perhaps the most alarming example of misapplication of media power to instruct and condition others, and to shape a world view (particularly in our youth), it is certainly not the only one. Mary Pipher,
in her acclaimed book, *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*, noted:

With puberty girls crash into junk culture ... They are coming of age in a more dangerous, sexualized, and media-saturated culture. They face incredible pressures to be beautiful and sophisticated ... They know something is very wrong, but they tend to look for the source within themselves or their families rather than in broader cultural problems ... Corporate America encourages girls to consume products such as Cokes and designer jeans, and chemicals such as alcohol and nicotine, to sedate their natural and understandable pain ... The junk values of our mass culture socialize girls to expect happiness and regard pain as unusual. Advertising suggests that if you aren’t happy, something is wrong. Pain is presented as something that can and should be avoided by consuming the right things. (Pipher, 1994, pp. 12-13, 202)

In her next book, *The Shelter of Each Other: Rebuilding Our Families*, Pipher continued:

Our children are growing up in a consumption-oriented, electronic community that is teaching them very different values from those we say we value. The role of parents has changed dramatically. Good parents used to introduce their children into the broader culture; now they try to protect their children from the broader culture. Good parents used to instill the values of the broader culture; now they try to teach their children values very different from the ones the world at large teaches ... For the first time in two thousand years of Western civilization, families live in houses without walls. That is, they live in a world in which walls offer no protection. Technology has brought the outside world into the living room ... Crime on the nightly news makes all places feel dangerous. Electronic media seeps into the interstices of homes and teaches children ways of thinking, feeling and behaving that are at odds with common sense. Families are reeling under the pressures of a culture they can’t control ... The media forms our new community. The electronic village is our hometown ... Parents and children are more likely to recognize Bill Cosby or Jerry Seinfeld than they are their next-door neighbors ... These [media] relationships feel personal. But they aren’t. We “know” celebrities but they don’t know us.

The new community is not a reciprocal neighborhood like earlier ones. David Letterman won’t be helping out if our car battery dies on a winter morning ... Jane Fonda won’t babysit in a pinch ... These vicarious relationships create a new kind of loneliness — the loneliness of people whose relationships are with personae instead of persons. (Pipher, 1996, 11-13)

Pseudo-relationships, junk values, junk culture — Pipher sees these as components of media and other modern cultural influences that create powerful deterrents to effective family life and to healthy life building. Relationships with (media-created) two-dimensional people, crafted from imagination to create passive entertainment for viewers and profit for producers, do not provide effective preparation for life with real people. Three-dimensional, real living human beings do not exist solely to provide gratification for others. Yet significant media consumption — even of innocuous programs — can condition viewers of all ages to respond to other people as two-dimensional providers of need-fulfillment and pleasure — or deterrents to it, in which case anger, rudeness, or even violence are becoming increasingly commonplace responses (Faust, 2000, p. 43; Hinckley, 1998, p. 50).

Dr. Terry Warner (2001) cites a quotation he encountered in childhood that inspired much of his work: “To the immature, other people are not real.” Warner writes movingly of the difference between what Martin Buber called “I-Thou” relationships, in which people value each other as beings of equal worth and validity, and “I-It” relationships, in which people view others simply as means to their desired ends, or as resented obstacles to those ends (Warner, 2001, pp. 41-50). Two-dimensional media relationships, in which other people are presented only as objects for sexual and/or violent fantasizing, or to inform of experiences or products designed to make one “happy,” can certainly condition young and old minds to create “I-It” relationships. Further, as Pipher observes:

Ads manipulate us into being dissatisfied. As businessman B.E. Puckett said, “It’s our job to make people unhappy with what they have” ... Advertising teaches us to live on the level of the pleasure principle. This leads to impulse-control problems and to feelings of entitlement. “I am the center of the universe and I want what I want.
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now.” This thinking creates citizens who are vulnerable to quick fixes. It leads to citizens filled with self-pity, which is the flip side of entitlement ... Advertising teaches that people shouldn’t have to suffer, that pain is unnatural and can be cured. They say that effort is bad and convenience is good and that products solve complex human problems ... The propaganda that life is made happier by purchases encourages adults and children to make bad decisions about their time and money ... Our current value system emphasizes profit over human well being. (Pipher, 1998, pp. 93-94)

Secular commentators are not alone in their concern about the destructive potentials of media influence in shaping beliefs about the world and other people, and behavior generated from such beliefs. In 1995, Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin noted:

Our Heavenly Father opened the windows of heaven and gave his children the Word of Wisdom to warn against consuming substances that can damage and destroy our physical bodies. He likewise has, through prophets, cautioned against consuming the steady diet of evil that is offered relentlessly in today’s media, especially magazines, movies, videocassettes, video games, and television. The windows of computer monitors and television screens can bring to us very useful information, but they can also bring information that is evil, degrading, and destructive.

The Lord has warned repeatedly against the evils and designs of conspiring men in our day who would enslave us to our appetites and passions by tempting and tantalizing us with obscene images, words, and music. Through his servants the Lord has cautioned us strongly not to take into our minds thoughts that can harm our spirits.

Since 1950, Church leaders speaking in general conference have counseled us some seventy-five times against unhealthy media consumption. In recent years, as standards of public decency and morality have declined and as public media have reflected and often led that decline, these words of loving concern from inspired shepherds of the Lord’s flock have come with more frequency and greater urgency. The watchmen on the tower have raised a warning voice.

I add my own voice. I suggest that we pay greater heed to voices of warning that our Father in Heaven has raised against the forces of Satan that come so easily and so pervasively into our homes through the media. I think of all the words of counsel and direction that we have received on this matter as constituting collectively a “word of wisdom for the mind.” Just as we exercise great care about what we take into our bodies through our mouths, we should exert a similar vigilance about what we take into our minds through our eyes and ears. (Wirthlin, 1995, p. 75)

Small wonder, then, that the new For the Strength of Youth booklet addressed by Church leaders to LDS teens includes these prophetic instructions:

Whatever you read, listen to, or look at has an effect on you. Therefore, choose only entertainment and media that uplift you. Good entertainment will help you to have good thoughts and make righteous choices. It will allow you to enjoy yourself without losing the Spirit of the Lord.

While much entertainment is good, some of it can lead you away from righteous living. Offensive material is often found in websites, concerts, movies, music, videocassettes, DVDs, books, magazines, pictures, and other media...

Do not attend, view, or participate in entertainment that is vulgar, immoral, violent, or pornographic in any way ... Have the courage to walk out of a movie or video party, turn off a computer or television, change a radio station, or put down a magazine if what is being presented does not meet Heavenly Father’s standards. Do these things even if others do not. (The First Presidency, 2001, pp. 17-19)

Ancient prophets, with inspired foresight, likewise gave instructions for people living amidst prophesied latter-day corruption. Moroni, writing directly to a latter-day audience, instructed:

I will show unto you the way to judge; for every thing which inviteth to do good, and to persuade to believe in Christ, is sent forth by the power and gift of Christ; wherefore ye may know with a perfect knowledge it is of God. But whatsoever thing persuadeth men to do evil, and believe not in Christ, and deny him, and serve not God, then ye may know with a perfect knowledge it is of the devil; for after this manner doth the devil work, for
he persuadeth no man to do good, no, not one; neither do his angels; neither do they who subject themselves unto him. (Moroni 7:16-17)

Media can contribute significantly to the building and strengthening of cultural values and widespread beliefs, whether for good or for evil. General Authorities have been increasingly vocal in recent years about the media – not just in warning of its dangers, but in appreciating its great power for good, when used appropriately. President Hinckley rarely speaks to General Conference audiences without expressing profound gratitude for the media technologies that allow Church members across the world to gather as one great family and hear the voices of Church leaders, an experience that otherwise would be impossible for those living in distant lands (e.g., Hinckley, 2002).

Recent years have also seen the development of an official Church website <http://www.lds.org>, including a full on-line archive of Church magazines, scriptures, and other resources. A new missionary site <http://www.mormon.org> allows people to investigate the gospel at their own pace in the privacy of their own homes. Similarly, AMCAP leaders in recent years have worked diligently to begin harnessing the power of media tools to facilitate the sharing of gospel-based information for counselors through its website, <http://www.amcap.net>.

Indeed, modern technology and mass media can do virtually limitless good when applied to positive principles. However, many of the beliefs and behaviors taught by the popular media can only exacerbate the problem of widespread fear and depression.

**The Gospel of SHERM: Secularism, Hedonism, Ethical Relativism, and Materialism**

Mass media and advertising have brought into society's homes simplified but powerful expressions of idea systems which were once discussed only in elite academic circles. They are constantly paraded before impressionable minds, both young and old, in language easy to be understood – accompanied by stories and images that cheerfully demonstrate the behavioral application of these "philosophies of men." This should come as no surprise to those who recall President Joseph F. Smith's warning early in the twentieth century that:

There are at least three dangers that threaten the Church within, and the authorities need to awaken to the fact that the people should be warned unceasingly about them. As I see these, they are flattery [see Jacob 7:1-5, D&C 10:25-27] of prominent men in the world, false educational ideas, and sexual impurity. (Smith, 1914, p. 476)

Elder Neal A. Maxwell has referred to these ideas as "today's malevolent isms" (Maxwell, 1995, p. 66). They may be organized and summarized as follows:

**Secularism:** God is irrelevant in human affairs, or is even non-existent. Human reason and resources are sufficient alone to meet human needs.

**Hedonism:** The pursuit of personal pleasure is life's principle purpose. Every impulse should be satisfied. All pain or discomfort is negative and should be avoided at all costs.

**Ethical Relativism:** Personal preference and situational factors determine morality. People should do what seems right or feels good to them. Moral reality is what you think it is.

**Materialism:** Only that which is tangible or physically measurable is real and of value. Material products and services are the source of human happiness, safety, and healing.

As urged by President Joseph F. Smith, Church leaders throughout the past century have warned unceasingly about the dangers of such "false educational ideas" (President Smith's danger #2), which tend to have the net result of encouraging "sexual impurity" (President Smith's danger #3), among a host of other social ills, all of which are proselytized through "the flattery of prominent men in the world" (President Smith's danger #1).

These "prominent men," one could argue, may include not only authorities in a variety of academic disciplines, but also well-known media celebrities. For who is more "prominent" in a typical twenty-first century life than the actors and newscasters whose two-dimensional presence accompanies many individuals and families through their various activities in various locations for many hours each day; or the music star whose larger-than-life, poster-sized image is a cherished centerpiece of many children's bedrooms?
Examining each of these “malevolent isms” in turn, let us review some of the numerous statements Church leaders have made throughout this past century regarding each of these ideas, which together can be characterized as the gospel of SHERM:

**Secularism**

The foundation and wellspring of all the others, this idea was described in the 1980’s by President Ezra Taft Benson as follows:

> As a nation, we have become self-sufficient. This has given birth to a new religion in America which some have called secularism. This is a view of life with the idea that God is not in the picture and that he has nothing to do with the picture in the first place ... All events are explained from a “humanistic” frame of reference. This removes the need for faith in God or a belief that he is interested in the affairs of men. (Benson, 1988, p. 319)

Elder Neal A. Maxwell taught in the 1970’s:

> In a sense, eternalism sees the individual and his potential as one might view an acorn and the subsequent forest. Secularism sees the individual as a very important and very real, but very temporary, phenomenon in the cosmic landscape — which leads inevitably to other values and emphasis. When life-style takes the form of “me” and “now” rather than “us” and “always,” apparent consequences are inevitable. (Maxwell, 1974)

President Benson elaborated on the behavioral (or “life-style”) consequences of eliminating a belief in God and his relevance in human affairs:

> Some would justify their immorality with the argument that restrictions against it are merely religious rules, rules that are meaningless because in reality there is no God. This you will recognize is merely an untruthful rationalization designed to justify one’s carnal appetite, lust, and passion. God’s law is irrevocable. It applies to all, whether they believe in God or not. Everyone is subject to its penalties, no matter how one tries to rationalize or ignore them. (Benson, 1988, p. 281)

We ... deplore the growing efforts to establish irreligion, such as atheism or secularism, as the official position of the United States of America, thus obscuring and eroding the rich and diverse religious symbols of our public life. (News of the Church, 1979)

The same year, Elder Neal A. Maxwell warned,

> Irreligion as the state religion would be the worst of all combinations. Its orthodoxy would be insistent and its inquisitors inevitable. Its paid ministry would be numerous beyond belief ... This new irreligious imperialism seeks to disallow certain opinions simply because those opinions grow out of religious convictions. (Maxwell, 1979)

Only thirteen years later – ten years ago – Elder James E. Faust commented on the direction of social and political developments:

> The new civil religion is, in my opinion, coming dangerously close to becoming a state religion of secularism. (Faust, 1992, p. 71; see also Ballard, 1992)

Even more recently, Elder Neal A. Maxwell spoke of “the slums of the spirit created by spreading secularism” (Maxwell, 1995, p. 67).

These “slums of the spirit” engendered by secularism could be discussed at length – its impact not only on religion, but on the creative and performing arts, and on the physical and behavioral sciences. Its influence shapes modern views on history, literature, education, politics (especially social policy), and individual lifestyles. When God’s guiding principles are removed from these significant arenas, the inevitable result is confusion and deterioration. When he is eliminated as the acknowledged source of law and truth – or even as the source of existence – a significant void of meaning is created, a void that other “malevolent isms” rush in cheerfully to fill.

**Hedonism**

Elder Maxwell has written: “Of all today’s malevolent ‘isms,’ hedonism takes the greatest toll ... For some, their god is their belly [Phil. 3:19], as are other forms of anatomical allegiance!” (Maxwell, 1995, p. 67). The message that life’s basic purpose is to have fun and expe-
rience personal pleasure is rampant in the cultural environment of modern life. As a close corollary, the avoidance or elimination of pain, discomfort, or even inconvenience is encouraged, particularly through product advertising. Hedonistic lifestyles, pleasure resorts, and chemical paths to pleasure and pain relief (both physical and emotional) are becoming increasingly common fixtures on the modern landscape. Elder Boyd K. Packer has noted:

We live in a day when the adversary stresses on every hand the philosophy of instant gratification. We seem to demand instant everything, including instant solutions to our problems. We are indoctrinated that somehow we should always be instantly emotionally comfortable. When that is not so, some become anxious — and all too frequently seek relief from counseling, from analysis, and even from medication. It was meant that life would be a challenge. To suffer some anxiety, some depression, some disappointment, even some failure is normal. Teach our members that if they have a good, miserable day once in a while, or several in a row, to stand steady and face them ... There is a great purpose in our struggle in life. (Packer, 1982, p. 94)

"Struggle in life" is not consistent with a philosophy of fun, pleasure, and pain avoidance. Aldous Huxley, in his classic futuristic novel, *Brave New World* (1932), painted a chilling picture of a technologically-dependent, hedonistic society. Social and genetic engineering, elimination of religion and family, encouragement of unrestrained sexual expression including in the very young, intense titillating media, and all-purpose use of "soma" (a prescribed drug used in various doses to eliminate all awareness of pain or stress), were among the strands of the social fabric he envisioned in his nightmarish account.

In his introduction to the 1946 edition, Huxley noted that only fifteen years after writing the novel, many of his predictions were materializing at an astonishing rate. "Nor does the sexual promiscuity of *Brave New World* seem so very distant," he observed. "All things considered it looks as though Utopia [the world he described in the novel] were far closer than anyone, only fifteen years ago, could have imagined. Then, I projected it six hundred years into the future. Today it seems quite possible that the horror may be upon us within a single century" (Huxley, 1946, xii-xiv). If Huxley were on hand today to observe current hedonistic, sexual, and cultural trends, he would likely lament that he was not far from correct in that sad assessment.

Of hedonism and its social impact, especially widespread fatherlessness, Elder Maxwell has noted: "These and related consequences threaten to abort society's future even before the future arrives! Yet carnalists are unwilling to deny themselves, even though all of society suffers from an awful avalanche of consequences!" (Maxwell, 1995, p. 67).

**Ethical Relativism**

Elder Maxwell has observed:

As prophesied, ethical relativism is now in steep crescendo: "Every man walketh in his own way, and after the image of his own god, whose image is in the likeness of the world" (D&C 1:16). Without the lamp's perspective, gross distortion results [see Jacob 4:13]. (Maxwell, 1995, p. 68)

If the basic standard for decision-making, on an individual and on a societal level, is "do what feels good" or "do what seems right to you" without guidance from unifying universal law, then indeed "gross distortion results," with consequences including (to name only a few) unbridled sexuality, rationalized violence, unwise consumption, and unethical business practices harming many people. The idolatries, or counterfeit religious systems, of previous cultures at least unified them in a consensus of where to center their worship and how to conduct their lives. In an ideological system where "every man walks after the image of his own god," where self-interest is the primary good and prime directive, community breaks down, as individual appetite becomes the only omnipotent, omnipresent deity acknowledged and obeyed. Elder Maxwell insightfully asked:

How can a society set priorities if there are no basic standards? Are we to make our calculations using only the arithmetic of appetite? ... A society not based on key values like loving our neighbor will inevitably subsidize selfishness and will place a premium upon an apostate form of individualism at the expense of community ... If self-interest is the final determinant, why should we be
inconvenienced by the needs of others? A value-free society focuses upon things like “me” and “now” – it has little sense of history out of which to fashion the future.” (Maxwell, 1978)

Unfortunately, disciples of ethical relativism are often not content to indulge their desires privately. What begins as “I want it, therefore it’s right” on an individual level progresses to political demands to make “it” a protected right, ultimately seeking to silence all alternative views. What starts as a demand for personal license and the right to decide one’s own values ends as a tyrannical imposition of those chosen values on others. This is most often the case in matters pertaining to sexuality and family life, such as abortion, premarital sex, birth control, sex education, easy divorce, same-sex attraction, and First Amendment “rights” to create and distribute violent or pornographic media, denying the rights of others to even edit out elements they find offensive. Apparently others are to sit silently by, swallowing the “second-hand smoke” of such initiatives.

Materialism

President James E. Faust, in an address given just two years ago entitled “Shield of Faith,” observed:

Technology may help us communicate with each other and the world, but not with God. I wish to sound a voice of warning to this people... Any of us can be left behind, drawn away by the seductive voices of secularism and materialism. (Faust, 2000, p. 18)

The cultural message is ever-present that material products are needed to produce happiness, pain relief, warm intimate relationships, and personal fulfillment. Mary Pipher observes:

We are even encouraged that it’s patriotic to spend. Our economy depends on massive consumer spending on nonessentials. We must buy to keep America afloat whether we can afford to or not. (Pipher, 1998, p. 94)

“Or not” is a phrase replete with significance, given the elevated levels of consumer debt and numbers of personal and business bankruptcies that spring from such indiscriminate spending.

Materialism confers upon human beings the ignoble identity of “consumer.” Imagine, children of the Creator of the universe, being taught that their function in society is primarily to “consume” human-built products! Further, materialism conditions people to regard others as objects for their consumption or to meet their needs (a particularly lurid condition in the materialistic universe of pornography). Spouses evaluate each other, both initially and over time, on their partner’s ability to “meet my needs” and “make me happy.” Failure to consistently produce these effects results in spouses being traded in, like so much merchandise at a Wal-mart return desk.

In the face of such trends, Peter’s predictions become ever more descriptive of current conditions:

There shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction. And many shall follow their pernicious ways; by reason of whom the way of truth shall be evil spoken of. And through covetousness shall they with feigned words make merchandise of you... (2 Peter 2:1-3, emphasis added)

Noting the consequences of such “damnable heresies,” Elder Maxwell observed in April 1996:

All about us we see the bitter and abundant harvest from permissiveness. A perceptive person has acknowledged, “The struggle to live ethically without God has left us not with the just and moral order we imagined, but with disorder and confusion. Something has gone radically wrong with secularism. The problem has more than its share of irony, for secularism, in the end, has converted itself into a kind of religion. Now the transition has become complete: the state has become the church” (Peter Marin, “Secularism’s Blind Faith,” Harper’s Magazine, Sept. 1995, 20). The more what is politically correct seeks to replace what God has declared correct, the more ineffective approaches to human problems there will be... I have no hesitancy, brothers and sisters, in stating that unless checked, permissiveness, by the end of its journey, will cause humanity to stare in mute disbelief at its awful consequences. (Maxwell, 1996, p. 68)
In 1998 Elder Maxwell commented on the emotional consequences of these philosophical ideas:

There is an increasing and profound sense of existential despair in the world. A grumpy cynicism now pervades politics. Many feel burdened by society's other accumulating anxieties. Even those who are spiritually secure themselves can sense a chill in the air. Cold secularism causes some of that shivering ... There is so much unsettlement and divisiveness. No wonder the subsequent loss of hope almost inevitably sends selfishness surging as many, resignedly, turn to pleasing themselves. (Maxwell, 1998, p. 62, emphasis added)

Despair, grumpiness, accumulating anxieties, coldness, divisiveness, hopelessness, selfishness, resignation, unwise but desperate satisfaction of animal impulses - these are not couched in the clinical language of the DSM-IV (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). But it is not a far stretch to suggest that these emotional ills Elder Maxwell identified may closely resemble the presenting symptoms of those troubled souls who fill our therapy offices, seeking relief and comfort.

The gospel of SHERM, which may indeed be the generalized macro-“cognitive distortion” that underlies so much contemporary human suffering, continues to be taught in a variety of forms, including academic teaching and writing, and widespread media distribution. The “helping professions” are not devoid of it. In fact, many writers credit psychology with much of the popularization, distribution, and creation of application strategies for the anti-value systems discussed here, including authors cited earlier (Pipher 1996, Grossman 1995, Huxley 1946). Elder Ezra Taft Benson commented in 1969:

The world worships the learning of men. They trust the arm of flesh. To them, men's reasoning is greater than God's revelations. The precepts of man have gone so far in subverting our educational system that in many cases a higher degree today, in the so-called social sciences, can be tantamount to a major investment in error. Very few men build firmly enough on the rock of revelation to go through this kind of indoctrination and come out untainted. Unfortunately, of those who succumb, some use their higher degree to get teaching positions even in our Church educational system, where they spread the falsehoods they have been taught. (Benson, 1969, pp. 12-13; 1988, p. 319)

Wherever and however it is taught, the gospel of SHERM, a powerful modern idolatry (D&C 1:16, Isaiah 2:5-22), separates its disciples from the true and living God. It encourages them to substitute the precepts of men for the wisdom of God (2 Nephi 28). It tantalizes them with the promise of liberty and pleasure, but leaves them ultimately empty, without a secure anchor for their lives. It brazenly invites its adherents to live "without God in the world," with consequences documented in sober warning words by multiple scriptural witnesses:

Behold, I say unto you, wickedness never was happiness. And now ... all men that are in a state of nature, or I could say, in a carnal state, are in the gall of bitterness and in the bonds of iniquity; they are without God in the world, and they have gone contrary to the nature of God; therefore, they are in a state contrary to the nature of happiness. (Alma 41:10-11)

They are without God and Christ in the world; and they are driven about as chaff before the wind ... as a vessel is tossed about upon the waves, without sail or anchor, or without anything wherewith to steer her; and even as she is, so are they. (Mormon 5:16, 18)

These sad words are tragically descriptive of many today, who lives are impacted and partially directed by the gospel of SHERM - the secularistic, hedonistic, ethically relativistic, materialistic values paraded continuously through the media and the popular culture, to children and youth as well as adults. As contemporary waves grow fiercer and taller, as social and economic conditions worsen, as pervasive training in violent and sexual behavior bears its inevitable and sorrowful fruit, many indeed feel "tossed about upon the waves ... without anything wherewith to steer" them (Mormon 5:18).

Such is the depressive, anxiety-inducing environment of the 21st century in which AMCAP therapists find themselves. Situated to serve, positioned to make a difference, perhaps indeed AMCAP and its members are "come to the kingdom for [just] such a time as this" (Esther 4:14).
“Publishers of Peace” – How AMCAP Members Can Build and Maintain Hope Within Themselves, Their Clients, and Their Culture

Over the previous pages, the broader context for 21st-century depression and fear has been examined. Social, environmental, cultural, and philosophical factors contributing on a macro-level to the micro-level distress of individuals and families has been explored. This discussion has described why simplistic assessments of “chemical imbalance” or “family dysfunction” are insufficient by themselves to address the full range of concerns creating today’s emotional distresses, and has discussed the multi-level stressful impact on today’s clients of environmental factors, including:

- **external social conditions**, such as economic instability and widespread violence;
- **media power**, which is often used for destructive purposes; and
- **anti-moral philosophical ideas**, attractively packaged and widely distributed, which affect the inner core of everyday consciousness and decision-making.

In such a cultural context, how, in addition to current therapeutic strategies, can AMCAP therapists best help those distressed souls who come to them, seeking direction and comfort? Addressing the three factors identified above, a few suggestions may be helpful.

**Teach Perspective**

In responding to social conditions and events, clients can be helped to recognize that although the bad exists, it is not all that exists, even in these times of turmoil. For every building decimated on September 11, there are thousands of others that remain standing. For every sniper in Washington DC, there are thousands of law-abiding, peaceful, even kindly, individuals - in every city throughout the world. The media’s unavoidable tendency to focus on chosen fragments of reality can cloud our awareness that “real” reality is a lot bigger and multi-faceted than what is being portrayed. And, to a significant extent, far more benevolent.

Gospel perspective, for LDS clients or religious-minded others, can build latter-day hope as few other things can. The Savior’s teachings about the last days, outlining both their tribulations and their glories (D&C 45, 38, 133), the on-schedule ripening of both the wheat and the tares (Matt. 13; D&C 86:1-7), the foreknown maturation of the fig tree (Matt. 24, JS-Matt.) and other such insights can provide great strength and reassurance of God’s omniscience. A preview and full understanding of his plan for the world can prepare faithful souls for the escalating stresses of latter-day living, just as childbirth education can prepare mothers to deal with the increasingly intense pains of childbirth. Prepared mothers learn to manage and interpret their pains as progression toward something wonderful - the birth of their baby. Gospel perspective allows individuals to do the same with the signs of the times.

As the Savior encouraged his disciples, when they were shaken by his description of latter-day circumstances, “Be not troubled, for, when all these things shall come to pass, ye may know that the promises which have been made unto you shall be fulfilled” (D&C 45:34, see also verses 26-46). In the midst of widespread cultural decay, the kingdom of God is, as predicted, beginning to roll forward and shine forth as never before. Temples dot the earth - 114 at present. The message of the gospel is flooding the earth, through an army of missionaries and through the wise application of media power and technology to its rightful function - to spread saving truth (Ballard, 1996; Scharman 1999). Zion is beginning indeed to rise in beauty and in holiness (D&C 82:14).

Nature daily reminds us that as night progresses to its deepest blackness on one portion of the planet, so the sun rises in magnificent shining glory on another - both occurring at exactly the same time. So it is in the times we live in – Zion and Babylon each continuing to ripen steadily, side by side. Real as it is, the bad is not all that exists. That is the crucial, comforting message of perspective.

**Teach Discernment**

In a world where “the bad keeps getting badder, and the good keeps getting gooder,” it is crucial to develop the ability to tell the difference between the two. Previous generations of parents taught their children, “don’t believe everything you read.” Modern parents would be wise to teach themselves and their children, “don’t believe everything you see and hear” – particularly in the mass media.

Mormon chapter 7 offers crucial keys for the development of this ability to discern between good and evil.
First (see verses 13-19), that which leads to faith in and obedience to Christ comes from God, and is good; that which leads away from him is not of God, and can only lead to misery. Second (see verses 20-48), one can apply the great standards of faith, hope and charity to this crucial discernment process. That which is of God strengthens faith, hope, and charity – the pure love of Christ – it is a positive influence, and can be enjoyed and embraced with confidence (see 1 Thess. 5:21, AF 13). That which fosters the opposite of faith (fear), the opposite of hope (despair), or the opposite of charity (anger, hatred, violence, lust) is of a darker origin, and should be strenuously avoided as the destructive cancer that it is.

Extensive clinical experience has demonstrated that clients afflicted with fear, despair, anger, or lust (particularly teens) are frequently feeding that emotional affliction with media or music whose messages and styles are specifically designed to produce and amplify those same dark emotional responses. The self-injury and suicidal behavior becoming rampant among youth is taught, boldly and deliberately, by certain “alternative” rock bands. These bands frequently are discovered to be the favorite bands of suicidal, violent or self-mutilating teen clients. Similarly, violent children are frequently found to have been gorging on media violence.

Even non-religious clients can be helped to see how their choices of media, music, and behavior can significantly influence their own and their children’s feelings, values, decisions, and overall well-being (or lack thereof). Taking in media and cultural influences with fully conscious awareness and activated decision-making – directly deciding which influences to permit and which to avoid – gives individuals and families power which they may otherwise not be conscious of. That is the clarifying, strengthening message of discernment.

Teach faith, family, and fellowship

The philosophical gospel of SHERM is specifically designed to destroy religious faith and the crucial relationships of family and community, by encouraging individuals to pursue their own pleasure and objectives without regard for divine law or the impact of their choices upon others. Such ideas are powerful – but only if they are internalized and acted upon. Mary Pipher (1994, p. 291) has observed, “I believe that the best defense against bad ideas is better ideas.”

The restored Gospel of Jesus Christ is the most rich and fertile of all environments from which to extract these healing, protective, “better ideas” about man’s relationship with his God, family, neighbors, community, and individual self (see Maxwell, 1976). It is rich in power to heal and to comfort, to change hearts, to give peace and lasting joy that no external experience can eliminate (Romans 8:35; John 14:27, 16:33) or effectively emulate.

In October, 2002, Elder Richard G. Scott made a stunning promise to those suffering from heavy burdens, including past abuse:

Complete healing will come through your faith in Jesus Christ ... Ponder the power of the Atonement. Pray to understand how it can heal you. (Scott, 2002)

Few other healing processes, if any, can extend this generous promise of “complete healing.” Dr. Scott Richards (AMCAP Vice-President, 2001-2003) has explained:

All secular theories and approaches take God out of the picture – they don’t consider or accept the idea that God exists and that he can make a difference in our lives. A theistic psychology and psychotherapy asks, “If we take seriously the notions that God exists and that he can bless and heal us, what are the implications of this for our understanding of human development, psychopathology, therapeutic change, and healing?” ... Theistic psychology and theistic psychotherapy [are] terms [used] to refer to psychological theories and therapeutic practices that take seriously the idea that God exists and that there are transcendent spiritual influences that can assist us in coping, healing, and growing. (Richards, 2001)

Indeed, when God is put back into his rightful place at the center of human life – especially in the exquisitely tender process of healing souls, relationships, and families – so much can change so quickly, and so deeply. “Transcendent spiritual influences,” even “complete healing,” can come into our clients’ lives, as they learn to turn their pains and sorrows over to him who is rightly called “The Prince of Peace” (Isa. 9:6, 61:1-4). Our professional labors can distract them from that
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central healing work, or can point them directly to it – to him who really is our Savior, lawgiver, healer, judge, and rightful king.

AMCAP has long been symbolized by four arrows pointing to a single center. AMCAP’s published mission statement [see p. 128 herein] clarifies:

What is the center upon which those arrows converge? It is The Living Christ – Christ whom we serve by serving our brothers and sisters in need, Christ whom we approach by our own spiritual strivings. (AMCAP Journal, 2000, p. 87; 2002, p. 128)

Indeed, when Christ and his teachings are at the center of our therapy, our research, our theory-building, our networking with other professionals, and (most importantly) our personal and family lives – miracles can and do happen. Our work can become inexpressibly satisfying, as we become part of a great force for good, even in these turbulent times. Such a focus can help us, as Christ-centered mental health professionals, to extend his love, declare his truth, and participate in his work of healing hearts and bringing to pass true “at-one-ment” (John 17:20-23) while working with individuals, families, and communities.

Amidst the devastation of September 11, 2001, something remarkable happened: America caught a rare and precious look at itself – un-scripted, un-airbrushed, and unedited. For a brief, unforgettable interval, regular television programming was interrupted, and the face of the American people was caught on tape, in the midst of its deepest grief. Significantly, it was not the accustomed media face of SHERM. It was the face of a people who came together to pray, to express love for their families and friends, to extend themselves in meaningful, even self-sacrificial service to their fellow beings. It was the face of hope. It was the face of faith, family, and fellowship. It was, sadly, a face that was all too soon transformed back to the usual media norm. But it was enough to let every observer know – reality is much bigger and better than what is usually seen on television and in the mass media. Mary Pipher (1996) believes that:

People cannot be whole and healthy unless they connect their lives to something larger than their personal happiness ... We need to be connected to each other ... The new millennium will be about restoring community and rebuilding the infrastructure of families. (Pipher, 1996, p. 32)

To that wise assessment, AMCAP would add: The new millennium will also be about restoring and strengthening faith, that Jesus Christ and his teachings are still the standard for human behavior and relationships – indeed, the only dependable, productive, and everlasting standard.

Conclusion: Publishing Peace

More than two-and-a-half centuries ago, Isaiah wrote, “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of them that publish peace; that bring forth good tidings of good, that saith unto Zion, Thy God reigneth!” (Isaiah 52:8). AMCAP members can be among the publishers of that healing peace. The definition of the word publish is “to make publicly known; announce” (Webster’s, 1984, p. 483). As never before, through wise use of 21st-century tools, AMCAP is prepared to assist in gathering, then “making publicly known,” those healing ideas regarding Christ-centered theistic psychology and theistic psychotherapy.

Sometimes this “publishing” will need to be in the elevated language of academia, so scholars and professionals may hear these ideas in their own “mother tongue” (see Maxwell, 1976). Even more often, it may need to be spoken in everyday language accessible to every man, woman and child – language that is “easy to be understood” (1 Nephi 14:23; 2 Nephi 25:4, 8). The secularized idolatrous gospel of SHERM is widely proclaimed today in both of these languages. To make the kind of cultural and spiritual difference that is so sorely needed, effective “publishers of peace” will need to do the same.

In our professional and personal associations with clients and colleagues, through contributing to the AMCAP Journal and other professional publications, by using and expanding the website and other internet resources, and in a variety of other ways – we as AMCAP members can indeed “gather, integrate, and share” what we have learned about healing lives and healing families, with Christ at the center of our efforts. May God bless and guide us as we labor to do so, that his precious children may be fed, comforted, and healed, in a truly inspired 21st-century context.
References