Liberating Form

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Last summer I had the opportunity of speaking at a most unusual fireside—beside an actual fire. The place was a campground in Hobble Creek Canyon east of Springville, the group was Professor Warren Wilson's class in primitive pottery. The students were widely varied in background and experience, but all were at some stage in the process of gathering clay from the many clay banks nearby, washing it, letting it settle, forming it with primitive tools into significant forms, drying it as pots and other forms, and preparing kilns in which to fire it. About half were members of the Church. Obviously they had developed a fine *esprit de corps.* I could hardly resist Brother Wilson's suggestion that my talk develop some kind of analogy between the process they were involved in and the gospel of Jesus Christ.

It was easy enough to do, given the remarkable beauty of the setting, the receptivity of creative people to ideas about creativity, and the fact that I had for years been pondering the relations between creativity, the freedom it implies, and the Church, which sometimes has not seemed to encourage creativity. For me it was a deeply meaningful experience, and for the group too, judging from various kinds of responses. What I said to them, and what I say here, I would hope will have special significance to those who wonder about, even chafe under the restrictions, the rituals, the thou-shalt-nots of the Church.

Earlier that summer my son and I had participated in a fathers and sons outing in that same canyon. In most re-

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*This article is the first in a projected series of personal essays intended to demonstrate how Mormon scholars have correlated their religious beliefs with their academic disciplines. Originally cast as a sermon, "Liberating Form" is an impressive example of the informal essay and a splendid beginning for a continuing *Studies'* feature.

**Dr. Clark is professor of English at Brigham Young University.

spects it was quite a usual outing: a chance to get away, to participate with Harlow in cooking, games, an evening fireside program (again by a genuine fire), and so on. But it had one unusual feature. About ten o'clock of that lovely Saturday morning each father was given a sealed envelope and told to walk with his son in any direction for ten minutes or so, then to find a pleasant spot under a tree and open the envelope. We did so. Harlow and I found ourselves under a small tree on the north side of the canyon where we caught the full effects of one of those perfect sunny mornings in Utah hills. A storm the previous day had freshened the area, the sun was warm but not uncomfortable in the shade of our tree, our walk uphill had been vigorous enough to make us ready for a little sitting. We sat and opened the envelope.

The instructions were simple, perhaps even predictable: among other things the father was to tell the son about a time when he had been important in someone else's life and about a time when someone else had been important in his, the son was to tell about some favorite goal or dream he had or relate some experience he had had that was especially significant to him and that the father had not known about. And so we sat for an hour or so, essentially alone with each other. And talked. About important things. Things that may have been important only to us. And important only because we were father and son there talking. Or maybe things that were of cosmic importance. And for the same reason. It was a remarkable experience, one that we should have every day or so, but seldom do have.

I told my fireside group about the outing. But I also told them about a poem and a short story. I want to share both here. The poem is brief:

NOTHING IN HEAVEN FUNCTIONS AS IT OUGHT

Nothing in Heaven functions as it ought;
Peter's bifocals, blindly sat on, crack;
His gates lurch wide with the cackle of a cock,
Not with a hush of gold as Milton had thought;
Gangs of the slaughtered innocents keep huffing
The nimbus off the Venerable Bede
Like that of a dandelion gone to seed;
The beatific choir keep breaking up, coughing.

But Hell, sweet Hell hath no freewheeling part:
None takes his own sweet time, nor quickens pace.

> Ask anyone, "How come you here, poor heart?"
> And he will slot a quarter through his face—
> There'll be an instant click—a tear will start
> Imprinted with an abstract of his case.

It's a simple enough poem, at least on the surface. Most readers will recognize it as a sonnet, and that particular kind of sonnet that came to us from the Italian poet Petrarch. It has a rime scheme students of literature "scan" as *abba abba cdcdcd*. The rime scheme divides the poem neatly into two parts: the octet (eight lines) and the sestet (six lines). The octet traditionally sets up some kind of problem or question or situation, the sestet somehow answers or responds to or plays against the octet. In this poem the picture of hell in the sestet plays against that of heaven in the octet. We may be struck by the unusual qualities of heaven and hell and the images used to make us see each. We may even be struck by the unusual subject matter for a sonnet. But we recognize the traditional sonnet form used without too much variation.

The short story, entitled "Parker's Back," is much longer and more complex. It is a strange story, but a most meaningful one. Its hero, O. E. (for Obadiah Elihue) Parker, has a predilection for tattoos. As a boy he had visited a side show and seen the tattooed man, his body completely covered with tattoos. It had been almost a mystic experience for Parker. He stood and stared, entranced by the motion of the tattooed figures when the man would move. He stared long after the man had left, still seeing the figures and their motion. Before long he finds himself going to tattoo artists, especially when he is in trouble. Having a new figure tattooed on him and watching it either directly or through a mirror restores his spirits and makes him a new man. But the effect does not last more than a week or so. At each new emergency he must go to the tattoo artist, until now his whole body is covered with tattoos just like the circus man's. Except for his back: the only part of him not covered is his back. And he can't see that. But now he is restless again, especially restless because he finds himself married when he does not want to be married, and married to a wife he cannot stand. The wife is not very attractive. But the real problem is that she is a nagging self-righteous religious fanatic. And she is pregnant. She nags at him for everything, especially his tattoos, which she dislikes immensely.

The old woman he works for nags him too, about his work. One day she tells him to be sure not to hit the tree in the middle of the field he is plowing. You can probably guess what will happen. Somehow he drives his tractor squarely into the tree. It climbs the tree, bursts into flames and flips over backward, throwing Parker off and his flaming shoe forty feet away. The experience is an apocalyptic vision for Parker. He jumps into his old truck and heads for town and the tattoo artist. This time he knows exactly what he wants—a picture that his wife will respect. He leafs through a pile of pictures of Christ until he comes to an old stern Byzantine Christ with piercing "all-demanding" eyes, the kind that follow you wherever you go. This is it. He lies until late at night while the artist tattoos the picture on his back. The artist gives him a mirror to examine the picture through another mirror. But "it don't have eyes." Tomorrow, though, the picture is finished. Parker looks in the mirror with trembling awe, moves the mirror from one side to the other—the eyes are boring into his no matter where he looks from. And even when he isn't looking the eyes bore into him from the back.

It is a remarkable image of the burden of Christ that Parker has taken upon himself, remarkable even in its grotesqueness. But poor Parker. He goes home and shows it to his wife—with predictable results. She tears into him, not so much for wrecking the tractor as for the "idolatry" of the tattooed picture. He can only go out into the field and weep.

Yes, it's a remarkable image, and a remarkable story. But I hope by now you are wondering what it has to do with the poem and with my experience up in the canyon with Harlow. No English teacher would dare introduce three such different experiences into even a fireside chat without having something in mind that ties them together.

Let's begin with the poem. I described it as a sonnet not to give a lesson in poetry but to get at something else. The sonnet is one of the most restrictive of forms. Each of its fourteen lines, almost by prescription, has ten syllables making up five iambic feet, or beats. All of us have seen a line "scanned" like this: "But Hell,/sweet Hell/hath no/freewheel/ing parts." The rime scheme is tight, almost dictating a poem of two parts. The form is artificial and prescriptive. And yet some of the most lovely, most "spontaneous," most energetic poems in the language are written in sonnet form, usually this

one or Shakespeare's variation of it. You must have felt the energy of the poem. Even if you were offended by the unusual concepts, you must have felt the energy. Where does it come from? You might say, from its idea, from the inverted versions of heaven and hell, from the unusual and sometimes powerful pictures it makes us see. Yes, from all these. But—let me insist on this—from its form. The poem gets most of its energy from what the poet does with its form: from the way it works within or strains against or plays with the conventions of its form.

One might begin to test such a statement simply by making a prose paraphrase of the poem: "Neither heaven nor hell is what we think it is; people make mistakes in heaven, but nothing goes wrong in hell." But where is our energy? We could get some of it by adding details. We could even build up a prose form that would get quite a bit of it. But this is a remarkably energetic sonnet. You will notice that I scanned a line from the sestet to show the meter. Had I used one from the octet, something would have gone wrong, even with the first line: "Nóthing/in héav/ en fúnc/tions ás/it ought." The first foot is reversed. And except to emphasize the meter most of us would not stress *as*. Or look at line eight: "The bé/atif/ic chóir/keep bréak/ing úp/coughing." Almost regular—until it coughs at the end, in an extra inverted foot! The rime doesn't quite work either: *crack, cock; huffing, coughing.* Other sounds jar: *bifocals* against *crack, cackle* against *cock.* And cocks don't "cackle" anyway. Nothing in this octet functions as it ought. And that, of course, is the point.

But Hell, sweet Hell! The meter is perfectly regular and perfectly mechanical. "And hé/will slót/a quárt/er through/his fáce." The rimes are also perfect—and mechanical. And that, again, is the point. In this mechanical hell a soul is a piece of mechanism, a slot machine or coin-operated computer which uses even his tears as something on which to "print an abstract of his case."

The major energy of the poem, though, comes from the way the two parts play against each other. Our first reaction to this heaven may be negative. But we look back from the perfect but mechanical hell, where no man takes his own sweet time nor quickens his pace, to that imperfectly functioning heaven, where even St. Peter, the dispenser of judgments, has to have bifocals and is both forgetful and blind enough to

sit on and crack them. And suddenly one's own sweet time becomes very sweet and precious indeed. The imperfections of heaven are humorous enough, but they too become precious because we recognize that they result from the fact of freedom. Even the slaughtered innocent children are free, free to form "gangs" and to blow the seedy halo off one of the venerable saints. That, I presume, is mostly what the poem is "about": the meaning of freedom in religious terms. It is easy enough to make a prose statement of that meaning: the price of freedom is a certain amount of inefficiency, in heaven or in earth; lack of freedom may be efficient enough but its price is infinitely greater: the soul becomes a mechanism. That is a meaningful statement and it has its own kind of energy. But contrasted with the poem it is insipid. All the paradoxical qualities of heaven and hell, all the fascinating contrasts set up by the two parts, all the nuances of sound and rhythm and image are lost. The form has been the means of releasing all that energy.

And here we are face to face with perhaps the most intriguing paradox in literature: *Form*—the form that seems to restrict, to limit, to hold one in—*has actually been the means of liberating the energy* implicit in the imaginative contrast the poem develops. Hence my title. The title isn't really mine, though. I borrowed it from a recent textbook on poetry, *The Liberating Form,* which I haven't even seen yet. But the paradox of that title intrigues me.

By now I hope you can see how the poem relates to that class in primitive pottery and to our fathers and sons outing and even to the short story. Professor Wilson's students were investing energy in finding, preparing, and shaping clay. It is an easy analogy to see the process in terms of the process of finding, preparing, and shaping one's own life. Only if one has a meaningful vision of the form one wants to achieve can the process fulfill itself in meaningful art forms. Magically enough, those students that had the significant vision and the requisite skill were able to produce forms the inherent energy and value of which far exceeded any amount of energy put into them. The controlling vision of form made possible the release of energy in the created product. I saw many of those forms. My wife and I, with Harlow and Krista, our youngest daughter, even went through the process for ourselves the next day. Like the forms of many of the others, ours were not very

sophisticated. But they all aspired to the condition of art—and to its energy. And quite a few of those we saw had real energy, real form—significant form.

So with the outing. The simple experiences brought Harlow and me together in as meaningful an hour as I have ever spent with one of my children. We could have had such an hour without any envelope, without even any outing. But the point is that we hadn't. The situation and the envelope became the liberating form for us. Under orders from nothing more than a written sheet we came to know each other in ways we had never known before. It was a vital experience for both of us.

And so with the short story, though more complexly. In abstraction, at least, the form of the story is much looser than that of the sonnet. One can do almost anything he wants, or is capable of, with a short story. But again, the energy of the story can be released only by the form that embodies it. Without the vision and then the realization of some kind of significant form, the story would have little of the energy implicit in its materials. My summary, of course, is not the story. It may be a pretty good summary, but it is not the story. I hope you could feel some of the energy from that summary. But to get the full energy you need to experience the story itself.

It was probably coincidence that both my poem and my story were written by devout Catholics, the poem by X. J. Kennedy, the story by that remarkable woman Flannery O'Connor, whose early death may have cost us the most vital storyteller of the middle half of our century. It could have been simply coincidence that both poem and story are on religious subjects. I could have talked about energy from form as easily with a sonnet from Shakespeare or Wordsworth. But my choices were not coincidences. The subject matter of both is crucial to what all this has been leading up to. Freedom through form! The freedom of those gangs of slaughtered innocents cannot be in an immediate sense very meaningful because not controlled or directed, though the fact of it is meaningful—cosmically meaningful. But the freedom that comes from form means something—in all the ways I have talked about. Poor Parker! He may not please his wife with his tattooed Christ. But he must have pleased his Christ: he voluntarily takes upon him the burden of Christ. For some of us that burden may be light, but not for Parker. He will bear it, inescapably, throughout his life.

The liberating form! Parker takes that burden upon him in the form of a work of art. Those eyes that bore into him from any and every direction are eyes projected by the Byzantine artist and caught by the tattoo artist. Their immediate force for Parker comes, then, from the artist. But far more important for him, and for us, they are the eyes of Christ, though contained in and hence liberated by that form.

Now, most of us do not have the kind of apocalyptic vision that Parker has. And for most of us His yoke may well be easy and His burden light. We carry it in joy and love. But the same Christ who assured us of the ease and lightness also exhorted us to be therefore perfect, even as our Father which is in heaven is perfect, and told us that the last shall be first only if he be the servant of all—hardly light burdens. He spoke as often in paradox as in parable. "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." But freedom may be the ultimate burden. It is for Parker. He may be free of the need to race for the tattoo artist whenever something goes wrong. He may be free now of the driving restlessness that had dogged him since he first saw the tattooed man. He may even somehow be free of the carping of his wife, though we can't tell from the story. But he can never be free of the burden of those piercing eyes and the stern face he carries on his back. Nor does he want to be. His crying at the end is probably as much for his wife and her refusal of his vision and burden as for her bellowed accusation of idolatry.

Miss O'Connor does not even mention her Catholic Church in the story. Nearly all of her Christ-ridden characters are in fact Baptists or Methodists or members of some lesser known evangelical group. What she dramatizes is the personal encounter with Christ—or the personal refusal of him. But of course her church stands always in the background of both the story and her vision of herself as a writer: she makes this explicit over and over again when she writes about her art.

Now, I hardly expect that any of you are going to go drive a tractor up a tree to test Parker's vision. I don't even plan to myself. But we don't need to. Most of us already have the vision, though in a much different form. What we need is the means to *realize* the energy implicit in that vision, to transform it into direction and action.

And that, of course, is what all this has been leading to. The liberating form. The form that can direct the hands as

they mold and shape and give meaning and energy to the clay my young creative friends were digging and washing and refining. The Church, of course, is that liberating form: The Church and the form given it by the Master whose name and whose burden it carries. The form given it by the gospel, the good news, it must disseminate. The Church, through its stake leaders, provided the form of that envelope that set Harlow and me to talking. Professor Wilson provided the initiative, but the Church through its university provided the organizing energy behind his class in the canyon. The students had to provide their own vision of form to give their clay energy, but the Church was the form behind the form. The Catholic Church was the form behind the form of both Kennedy's poem and O'Connor's story.

This, then, is the message I would give to the young people—and older ones too—who tend to rebel or chafe against the forms, the ritual, the programs, the requirements of the Church—and even to those who are comfortable within them all. The Church can provide the liberating form which gives direction, order, meaning to our energy. The Church can liberate that energy by giving it control and form.

Can do so. Nothing in ours or any other church guarantees that it *will* do so. This is the burden of Christ and the burden of our freedom. The Church can only provide the form within which we work. It may help motivate us. It may even help give us the vision of heaven and hell that can grow into our sonnet. But it cannot write the sonnet for us. It cannot mold or dry or form or fire the clay. It can provide the form within which our spiritual lives can generate their own energy and meaning. It can even provide something of the form within which our professional and business and occupational lives can develop their highest energies. It can provide the liberating form. But we must provide the energy. No sonnet can liberate energy not available to it. This again is the burden of both Christ and freedom (I see the two as closely related). We supply the energy.

With this in mind, let's look at two or three sides to that form which the Church provides us and against which we sometimes squirm. Mormons "pay" tithing. We may do it unwillingly, resenting the inroads it makes on our income. We may do it willingly because God has commanded it or because we do not dare not to or because it is the best insurance we can

buy. Or we may do it because as God's law it provides the framework within which we can both participate in and share the burden of Christ's work on earth and at the same time organize and plan our private economy to make our income go as far and in as many significant directions as we can make it. I trust that at least one of these concepts makes tithing part of a liberating form.

Or take the Word of Wisdom. We often talk as though this were what makes us a peculiar people. In the eyes of many outside our faith, it is. But even a little thought should tell us that the proscriptions of the Word of Wisdom are only negative conditions of salvation, that a whole lifetime of not smoking and not drinking can still be an empty and wasted lifetime. I have often said that no one has ever abstained himself into the kingdom of God. I'm not so sure of this when I watch someone really struggle against a life-long habit of coffee-drinking or even when I smell coffee perking on a cold winter morning. But what I am sure of is that the Word of Wisdom can liberate us from slavery to the things it warns us against. More apparently than most of our doctrines and beliefs it is a liberating form. For most of us it forms the framework within which we can achieve and maintain healthy bodies and minds, which in turn can generate the physical and intellectual and emotional and spiritual energy we need for rich, positive, creative lives.

Even our concern with mortality is often projected simply as a matter of abstinence, of "fugitive and cloistered virtue," as Milton called it. But an older meaning of virtue catches its real value. Virtue, the kind that engendered flowers for Chaucer or the kind that went out of Jesus at the touch of his garment, was energy, creative and healing energy. Which is what virtue should be for all of us: the positive, creative force inherent in our bodies as in our souls, the release of which will be the highest expression of that love we grow toward for our marriage that we believe to be eternal.

And so with even more fundamental doctrines and practices of the Church. Faith we even define as motivating power, the motivating power of all action. It can help us tap infinite sources of power. Repentance is a means of physical and emotional and intellectual and spiritual renewal, but first a means of liberation from the bondage of our mistakes and sins. Baptism, far from empty ritual, can be both the actual and

symbolic leaving behind of what we were and the narrow gate through which we can enter to see what we can become and to start becoming that vision of ourselves.

And so forth. The Church can be for us nothing at all, or merely the burden we bear. Or it can be the liberating form for our lives. It can help us release and channel and order the great potential of energy that few of us ever use at anywhere near its capacity. A glider soars, a jet plane flies not just because the wind blows or because a motor develops a half million pounds of thrust. The energy of wind or motor must be exerted on or within significant and controlled form. Imagine all that power being released by a jet engine unattached to anything, like the balloon you blew up as a child and let go—how it hissed and darted and sputtered aimlessly.

So with the poem, so with the story, so with our lives.

But of course one can write a bad sonnet following all the rules of the form. In fact "sonnet" is almost a synonym for the sentimental and trivial. Sonnets about Easter bonnets have almost nothing in common with Kennedy's—or Shakespeare's or Milton's—sonnets except the form. The difference depends on the kind of energy we put into the form.

On the other hand, we can write powerful, even magnificent poems using none of the recognized forms. We can strike out on our own, as Walt Whitman did, and create our own significant forms. This is what many potential young poets like to do. They don't want to be bound by the shackles of form. They want to soar wholly in the freedom of the creative process. But very soon they find themselves caught in one of the most profound of the paradoxes of creativity: that the creative person is at once the most free and the most bound of people, that his freedom can find meaningful release, meaningful expression only in significant form, that if he doesn't work within available forms he must expend a great deal of his energy creating his own, that most of the time it is more difficult to create meaningful forms of one's own than to create within forms already available and proven.

Such a form, I repeat, is the Church. And, at least from our perspective, the ultimate form. As in Kennedy's heaven, since we are free within it, since even its leaders are free—and human—within it, nothing in it may function quite as it ought —or quite as we think it ought. That is the price of freedom, Kennedy's poem tells us. The miracle is that it functions so

wondrously well. Only a machine can be made to function perfectly. Human beings—and human angels—probably should not be thought of as "functioning" at all. To the extent that we are merely functions perhaps we are in hell. But to the extent that we are living and working meaningfully within the Church, using its form to liberate our energies and direct and control them, to that extent perhaps we are in heaven already—or moving meaningfully toward it.

Such is the faith I live by and the testimony I bear. And bear as a burden, if you wish. But both "bear" and "burden" are rich words. "Bear" has to do with carrying and with expressing but also with giving birth. "Burden" is what one carries but also the repeated melody, the refrain one sings. All this may be the only sermon I preach. Perhaps it is the only sermon any of us preaches, though in many variations. But it may be enough of a sermon: that we live by and bear the burden of Christ, that his church is the form that liberates us and the energy we generate, that it provides us with the vision of form within which we can move whatever of clay is in us toward his vision of what we can be, that it provides the envelope within which we find the instructions to explore and express our love, that it provides the form to lead us toward our vision of heaven and our rejection of hell. I may see all this and express it and bear it a little bit differently than you do. That too is part of the glory and burden of freedom. But it is the same testimony and the same burden we all bear, the same refrain we sing: of the reality and meaning of Jesus the Christ and of his church and of our relation to both. Whatever else, in this sense his burden is light. May we all bear it in joy and light.