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# The Seduction of Our Gifts

*Pat Debenham*

Some time ago, I and other faculty members of the BYU Dance Department discussed our concern about the future of our students, particularly those in music dance theatre. These are highly skilled young people who can and should, by virtue of their technical and spiritual training, be lights unto the world. Many succeed professionally or semiprofessionally. We are excited for them. Many, however, far too many, do not fare as well spiritually. They are seduced—drawn away from things that are essential—not only by the world, but by the very gifts that take them into the world, the artistic gifts that God endowed them with.

## Opposition and Gifts

*Seduction!* I realize this is not a word that would usually surface in a gospel forum about gifts. Ordinarily, when I think about seduction, I see Gwen Verdon in Bob Fosse's *Damn Yankee* as the female devil incarnate Lola tempting Joe Hardy, singing, "Whatever Lola wants, Lola gets." With her long legs and corseted body, she is definitely beguiling and thoroughly seductive. In this scene, Lola fulfills the most common definition of what it means to seduce, that is, to lead astray by persuasion of false promises. What she offers to Joe is not in reality what he will actually get, nor will it fulfill his most important desires.

You may be saying, "I understand seduction by the Lolas of life. But as a Latter-day Saint pursuing my art to edify the children of men, how could I be seduced by my gift?" The answer lies in the fact that there is "opposition in all things" (2 Ne. 2:11), including those things that are meant for our good, such as artistic gifts. Opposition in this instance has less to do with

being tempted by the evil things of the world and more to do with the attitudes and choices we make regarding the gifts we have been given; when our gifts are misunderstood and misused, they will take us away from that which is precious beyond our understanding.

The reasons for this possibility were clarified for me by Neal A. Maxwell. Two of his statements about Satan's tactics during Christ's forty-day fast are particularly enlightening: "The evil one . . . avoids that which is most apt to be deflected by us."<sup>1</sup> And "the points of our personal vulnerability . . . will be exploited."<sup>2</sup> Satan will not tempt us with the things in which we have no interest, but he can hold us hostage by that which we want most, that in which we have an investment, that which we care for and nurture. Satan knows that if he can get the gift, he can get the person.

In this regard, *our gifts themselves can become instruments of seduction* and can lead us away from the eternal work that we have been given to do. The forces of our cultural landscape and the perceptions that we hold about our gifts make us vulnerable in ways we may not even realize. In far too many instances and even without our knowing it, Lola *does* get her way.

## Patterns of Obvious Seduction

Our gifts make us open to ways of being, attending, thinking, and acting that can be positive forces in developing a discipline grounded in eternal values. But when these ways of being go unchecked, obvious seduction takes place—we are lured into situations, places, and attitudes that compromise our relationship to the gospel. Meaning becomes transitory, and there is no centering agent or hierarchy for making choices. We lose our orientation and eventually find ourselves struggling with who we are. Family and institutional voices become muffled, and we guiltily distance ourselves, hoping to silence the disapproval of our disobedience. Ultimately, this journey moves us away from Christ.

Our most potentially seductive characteristics relate to our focus, our perspectives and values, and our boundaries. Some of the possible ways these characteristics route us to destructive paths are listed below.

### Seductive Focus

- As an artist, each of us seeks for a personal, unique voice. In the process, we are encouraged to improve by focusing on ourselves and on our technique. Our quest can lead to promoting the self rather than the message.
- The arts move us toward expression. When unchecked, expression becomes self-expression only—an engrossment in



the ego and in our own art. We are then not available to the guidance of the Spirit, neither in the creative process nor in our personal lives; the joys experienced when our souls are negotiated by the Spirit are lost.

- We enjoy mobility, freedom, and independence, but we can end up focusing on our own journey to the exclusion of serving others.
- Being part of an artistic community is important to us. Community is satisfying because we are in contact with like-minded people; similarity is comforting. But this community is an elite and often privileged population. This separateness moves us away from consideration for the general populace.
- We take pride in our work and often have a high need for recognition. We enjoy the fame, power, persuasive ability, money, and acceptance that often come with achievement. But assuming the role of an artist can lead us away from humility.

### **Seductive Perspectives and Values**

- We have an ability as creative people to see several possibilities for solution. Our regard for alternatives can diffuse into our overall lives and become an acceptance of others' moral codes. By valuing moral alternatives even when in some ways they go against our own original beliefs, we become susceptible to joining the adherents of those alternatives.
- We are often painfully aware of injustices in the world. Our sensitivity to social wrongs may cause us to align ourselves with individuals, groups, or causes that ultimately are at odds with the Church.
- We have an ability to live with disconcerting ambiguities. In other words, we can understand, see, feel, and possibly embrace that which may be inharmonious with the gospel.
- We entertain the "ifs" on many levels. When we entertain the "ifs" through "protracted consideration," Elder Maxwell suggests, we will succumb to temptation.<sup>3</sup>

### **Seductive Boundaries**

- Restrictions can become confining; rules are broken to achieve an effect. Although a disregard for constancy can feed creativity, it can also result in a disregard for the boundaries set by God.

- Being an artist often brings about a desire to be on or at the edge of our discipline or at least a desire to stay current with what is “happening.” To be at the edge, we may drop the core gospel principles that ground us.
- Being an artist encourages each of us to explore with a sense of immediacy. We may abandon past practices for new ones that, although they seem to serve us better in the moment, will not prepare us for the eternities.

If you are anything like me, there are many of these ways of being that you hold dear. Whether they move us toward or away from the gospel often becomes an issue of the incremental choices we make. A web page entitled “Tips on How to Flirt” caused me to see more clearly the cunning with which we are led away from goodness without even realizing it. For a person to be successful at flirting—and I think the Master Seducer has perfected these techniques—it is important to have repeated contact. Whispering is essential—“it always gets their attention.” Sitting alone is effective. You must treat the object of the flirtation gently. It is important to look over your shoulder and smile as well as look over the object from head to toe.<sup>4</sup>

Through gentle persuasion, we accept advances. Then with time, our sense of appropriateness changes. Our flirtations beguile us ever so subtly into making choices that our more refined, spiritually sensitive natures would not have made. What at one point would have been undesirable becomes acceptable behavior. Nephi describes the process with these telling phrases: “the devil . . . leadeth them away carefully,” “others he flattereth away,” and “he whispereth in their ears, until he grasps them with his awful chains” (2 Ne. 28:21, 22).<sup>5</sup>

Flirting produces heat, not light. Heat consumes you and leaves nothing but dross; light moves through space and time to reveal and brighten the way. The following example of an artist’s flirtation points out the difference. One of our students took her mother to see *Rent*. The mother, though uncomfortable, sat through the whole show but could not understand how her daughter could support such a production, especially knowing its content beforehand. (If I am not mistaken, this was the second or third time the young woman had seen the show.) When questioned about the lack of values in the show, the student outlined how the production values were high and the music singable. Yes, she agreed, there may have been some objectionable parts, and the morals of the characters portrayed weren’t what we profess, but the ultimate message was one of love and acceptance, which more than made up for the lack of moral content.



By flirting with others' standards, this student had been seduced into confusing heat with light.

We could discuss in greater detail where and how obvious seduction through our gifts takes place, but I think those circumstances are apparent and need no further consideration. It is the subtle seduction that most concerns me.

### Patterns of Subtle Seduction

Patterns of subtle seduction manifest themselves as thought, attitudes, and actions that on the surface seem innocent enough but when more thoroughly examined reveal attitudes and practices where *allegiance to the art, the gift, and the self are more apparent than allegiance to the gospel, others, and Christ*. This allegiance ultimately underlies movement away from spiritually informed practice toward activity that is counterproductive to spiritual growth. For me, this allegiance to the art rather than the gospel is perhaps the most challenging aspect of being an artist *and* a dedicated Saint because Satan's seduction happens within the context of our gospel practice.

Subtle seduction begins when words, phrases, and concepts from the scriptures and the words of the prophets are unwittingly modified, exaggerated, and taken out of context to support a righteous desire to magnify and ennoble the gift. Doing so, however, expands the gift beyond its original function. When we amplify the gift beyond its intended purpose or role, we have in essence violated the first of the Ten Commandments: "Thou shalt have no other gods before me" (Ex. 20:3).

I have identified three misconceptions that, when magnified, eventually shift us away from the restored gospel of Christ. These beliefs are (1) artists are particularly blessed, (2) artistic gifts are callings, and (3) strong, positive emotional responses to artworks or performances housed in a gospel-related context are always manifestations of the Spirit.

**Misconception 1: As artists we are particularly blessed to be in possession of our gifts.** Artists, like shamans, are awarded special consideration in society. Artists are seen as different, set apart. Through our gifts, we persuade, attract, entice, and move people beyond themselves. This ability is perceived as making us special and focuses an inordinate amount of attention on the individual.

As an artistic community, we often relish our uniqueness and even foster it. But the resulting self-centeredness can be destructive. I call this effect the Myth of Speciality. In the "world," the myth of speciality often manifests itself both in abhorrent behavior and in art that runs the gamut from

absurd to perverse. Within the context of the gospel, this myth causes us to see ourselves in subtly skewed ways, and if unchecked or unexamined, it creates an atmosphere where the other two misconceptions flourish.

For example, this feeling of specialness manifests itself in an odd, troubling way in the prayers that I hear BYU performers offer before rehearsals or performances. On these occasions, the students (and I find myself saying the same words) thank Heavenly Father for our gift, for our light. We thank him for the positive things we perceive we can accomplish with the gift. We ask, “Help *us* to bless the audience tonight, to bring light to them through what *we* have to share.” Though such prayers voice care for others and concern for God’s work, they also seem self-directed and congratulatory. Too often the word *we* occurs in conjunction with our special position in manifesting the gift, making our gift and ourselves—rather than God and others—the center of our prayers.

This sense of special “blessedness” also appears under the guise of what I call the Myth of Creative Power, which suggests that artists, by virtue of their creative power, are more Godlike than others. We like to assume that God, the First Creator, the creator of worlds without end, is also the first artist. As artists involved in the creative process, we believe we are thus more like him or at least more connected, more familiar with him, than others. We support that reasoning with questions that on the surface are righteous but again uniquely link artists with God: What, we ask ourselves, can be for us as Latter-day Saints more important than to be like God, who is the source of all light and truth? Aren’t light and truth what art provides the world? And shouldn’t we aspire to be vehicles of light, truth, beauty, love, and pure intelligence? Both the Myth of Speciality and the Myth of Creative Power are based in prideful attitudes that potentially separate us from others as well as from the gospel.

**Misconception 2: Artistic gifts are callings.** As meaningful as this concept is and as committed as it can make us to our art, we must be careful about this belief. This perception can, as mentioned earlier, be traced to our own interpretations of the scriptures and of the words of the Brethren regarding gifts. We have all read scriptural passages or heard addresses that “confirm” for us the importance of our gift in relation to the grand scheme of life. In many cases, we are impressed enough by the words and possibly by a personal spiritual prompting to consider our gift a calling. But callings in the Church are priesthood-appointed positions. We must be careful *not* to infer that our artistic gift, though divinely given, is a divine appointment. When we suggest that we are “called” or in some way appointed to use our gift, we precariously position ourselves as official representatives of God. In so doing, we are presumptuous, I believe, and in danger of



blasphemy. Of course, we feel a responsibility to magnify our gift, but to represent it to either the public or ourselves as a calling possibly perverts the original intent and certainly distorts the source of the gift. A Church calling is directly from God as an appointment with all the pertinent rights and blessings bestowed upon us. But viewing our gift as a calling is a self-appointment.

Now for what I consider to be the heart of my concern: just as we can be seduced into believing that our gift is our calling, we can also be lured into thinking that our proclivities are equivalent to gifts given to us by the Holy Ghost or by the Spirit of God. When we interpret scriptural and prophetic references about gifts to mean our God-given proclivities, we confuse our talent with the actual gifts that God enumerates in the scriptures. Even by simply using the word *gift* to identify our proclivities (as I have in this article), we can be seduced not only by our talents but also by the very label attached to them. Although the talents we call gifts are not in actuality the gifts referred to in the scriptures, we all too often equate them.

In making this association, we step onto slippery ground. We are in effect seduced into thinking our talents are more than they are, for we are claiming that our talent has a similar, if not the same, function that spiritual gifts have and, therefore, that our discipline is equal in weight and magnitude to the gifts that are named. We endow our talent with privileges and rights that may not be intended for it. I realize that this line of thinking is not, on the surface, how we perceive ourselves in relation to our talent or how we perceive the talent itself, but if we listen carefully to our language as we speak about our talents, we will find this perception lurking under our words.

Three major discussions of gifts occur in the scriptures: Moroni 10:8–17, 1 Corinthians 12:1–11, and Doctrine and Covenants 46:8–29. By examining these passages to clarify the nature of the scriptural gifts and their relationship to our talents, perhaps we will more faithfully honor and fulfill the nature of both. As we will see, one is ultimately in the service of the other. Without this foundational concept, we are, as I have suggested, open to seduction.

During his last opportunity to record words “of worth” (Moro. 1:4), Moroni outlined the spiritual gifts and spent a good deal of time exhorting us to “deny not the gifts of God, for they are many” (Moro. 10:8). He tells us that they are for the profit of men. The Apostle Paul also listed these gifts and states they are important enough that *he would not have us be ignorant of them* (1 Cor. 12:1). Clearly our understanding of them is vital.



In the three scriptural passages about spiritual gifts, those gifts are clearly identified: to teach the word of wisdom, to teach the word of knowledge “that all may be taught to be wise” (D&C 46:18), to have “exceedingly great faith” (Moro. 10:11), to heal and be healed, to “work mighty miracles” (Moro. 10:12), to prophesy, to behold angels and receive the ministering of spirits, and to speak and interpret languages and tongues. “These gifts come by the Spirit of Christ,” Moroni reminds us (Moro. 10:17), and are given by the Holy Ghost in support of our progression. These are the gifts that God presents to us as important.

Nowhere do these passages mention the gift of dance, song, music, or painting. Nor do these scriptures mention the gift for building or troubleshooting machines, the gift of public speaking, the gift of medicine, or the myriad of other gifts that we often refer to. I believe that herein lies part of the problem: what we label this proclivity that Heavenly Father has bestowed upon us can produce an exaggerated sense of what our abilities are for.

David Tinney, one of our music dance theatre faculty, has a unique perspective on our gifts and talents that helps to place our art making within a larger context. His feeling is that we need to consider our professional involvement in the arts as a job. Pure, simple, and pointed. It is a job. Our work in our art form is a vehicle that allows us to accomplish other things in life. It is not (and these are my words, not his) a “calling.” As much as I, the artist, the choreographer, the dancer-performer, have in the past reveled in—perhaps even been self-congratulatory for—my status in life, Dave’s awareness helps me to understand that my discipline-related talents *are not* the spiritual gifts that God bestows upon us to assist in the redemption of mankind.

**Misconception 3: Strong, positive emotional responses to artworks or performances housed in a gospel-related context are always manifestations of the Spirit.** During an encounter with a work of art or a performance, strong emotion is often confused with manifestations of the Spirit. Physical sensation, emotion, and artistic conventions can indeed be pathways to spiritual experiences. But in many instances, what is experienced as a spiritual manifestation is merely heightened sensation. Emotion, tears, and physical stirrings, not the Spirit, are “witnessing” to the individual. In other words, the experience is not a response to the still small voice but is a response to theatrical trappings and a dynamic that rides on a flow of manufactured heat rather than eternal light. This problem leads to my concern that creators and audiences alike sometimes participate in a phenomenon I call performed spirituality.

Performed spirituality appears when craft and art are used in such a way that physical and emotional responses are mistakenly experienced or represented as spiritual enlightenment. The spirituality is feigned and false. We have all experienced performances that in some way impressed us but left us unfulfilled. This response occurs when spirituality is manufactured. The experience is about artifice rather than what is actual. It is practiced. The performers and creators are skillful at knowing what techniques to use to obtain a desired emotional effect. They can move others and themselves by sheer technique. For example, pianists by the skilled use of crescendos, diminuendos, and ritardandos alone can heighten emotional response without the presence of the Spirit. Although the performers or audience may label such a technique-based response as a spiritual manifestation, the spirituality is manufactured rather than real.

In performed spirituality, emotion and passion become a vehicle for heat—a simulation of light and spirituality. The form, in a postmodern sense, becomes the substance, which makes distinguishing heat from light difficult. The form is *enactment rather than embodiment* and uses skill to impress rather than bless. It lacks the spiritual depth that ultimately connects on a level beyond the veneer of craft.

This performed spirituality appears when a performance or a creation is grounded in talent and not in eternal principles sustained by light and truth. When a work is grounded in the art itself, we will be impressed, whether we know it or not, by the technique and skill of the artists, not by the spirit that should accompany the work. It seems to me that spirituality just is. As with humility, you cannot try to be humble. Either you are humble, or you are not. When an individual tries to be humble, the “humility” feels hollow. The same is true of spirituality.

In 2 Timothy 3:1–7, Paul cautions us about “having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof.” When the passage is applied to creators and performers, I find it a chilling indictment of art that is more about form than eternal substance:

This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves, . . . Without natural affection, . . . heady, highminded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God; Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: *from such turn away*, For of this sort are they which *creep* into houses, and *lead captive* silly women laden with sins, *led away* with divers lusts, Ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth. (Italics added)

Performed spirituality can lead us away so that we are ever experiencing the heat of a work of art but are never able to come to a knowledge of the truth. Performed spirituality is thus suspect, even dangerous. It is a



misuse of our gifts, and in many instances, it is manipulative, though not always intentionally so. When feeling the powerful stirrings that art can produce, the inexperienced may not sense when outward form is not attended by the Spirit. They become confused about the way manifestations of the Spirit are dispensed. Passion and technique then become substitutes for spiritual sensation; outward form becomes a substitute for inner spiritual peace. Because the emotional high manufactured by the craft is not self-sustaining, occasional substitution is followed by increasing dependence on artistic experiences to provide “spiritual” sensations. A transient counterfeit replaces the enduring peace of the Spirit, leaving the person anchorless in times of seduction. And thus some of our dance and theatre students and some of the rest of us are lured away.

### **Protection from the Seduction of Our Talents**

Obvious and subtle challenges attend the work we do as Latter-day Saint artists. The Master Seducer knows that the artistic gifts we hold most precious have the potential to entice us away from eternal life. How then can we protect ourselves from the seduction that accompanies our talent?

As a defense against performed spirituality, partakers of art have a personal challenge to discern between the Spirit and the elements of emotion and physicality used to support artistic intent. Through awareness and experience, art audiences will come to know whether a work of art is a result of well-designed artistic conventions and/or dynamic eternal principles.

Makers of art need to be sensitive to and skilled at creating art that enlightens, not only through heightened emotional and physical feelings, but also through the transforming power of the Spirit. We should take responsibility for the potential of our craft to simulate spirituality and must distinguish between the emotional or physical effects of our art and the stirrings that come only from the Spirit. Furthermore, we cannot leave our art at the level of form only, of performed ritual. Our art needs to amplify eternal principles, generate gospel truths, and change understanding. But note that religious content alone—whether explicit or implicit—is not the answer. If unshaped by powerful technique, it also substitutes sentiment for substance. We must engage all our talent and training plus go underneath the form to get at the underlying spiritual elements. By such means, we can invite the Spirit to lead our audience, and us, to a more refined spiritual sensibility.

For me, the primary insights on protecting ourselves from seduction are offered by Doctrine and Covenants 46. Verses seven and eight provide

a context for the section's list of spiritual gifts. The passage admonishes us to ask God in all things

who giveth liberally; and that which the Spirit testifies unto you even so I would that ye should do in all holiness of heart, walking uprightly before me, considering the end of your salvation, doing all things with prayer and thanksgiving, that ye may not be seduced by evil spirits, or doctrines of devils, or commandments of men; for some are of men, and others of devils. Wherefore, beware lest ye are deceived; and that ye may not be deceived seek ye earnestly the best gifts, always remembering for what they are given.

How do we protect ourselves? First, we ask God for awareness. He will give us answers liberally—not just a few answers, but many. He tells us that the Spirit will confirm what we should be about and that, whatever we do, we should do it with “all holiness of heart,” with prayer and thanksgiving, considering the end of our salvation. (I do not know about you, but I am not yet reconciled between my art and the end of my salvation.) He tells us to ask, to listen, and to act *so that we will not be seduced* by either men or devils. (Oh, but Lola is so attractive!) In addition, so that we will not be seduced, he offers us his “best gifts.” Obviously, the gifts have eternal significance and protective power, or they would not keep us from seduction.

And what are the “best gifts?” They are the spiritual gifts listed in the scriptures. They are eternal gifts. They are gifts bestowed upon us by the power of the Holy Ghost. They are not our discipline-specific talents. These talents are to be used in service of the spiritual gifts. As the spiritual gifts become the focus of our attention, we will be able to fulfill the measure of our talents and use them in tangible ways as aids to move others and ourselves on to eternal life.

Through awareness we can identify and label our personal challenges, guarding against desire, putting our passion for our discipline in perspective. When we secure our practice in the light of the scriptures, our talents can be used in tandem with gifts of the Spirit. Then, when Lola appears—in whatever form—we will be able to say, “I have no need of thee.”

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1. Neal A. Maxwell, *Even As I Am* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1982), 72; see also Neal A. Maxwell, “Discipleship and Scholarship,” *BYU Studies* 32, no. 3 (1992): 7.

2. Maxwell, *Even As I Am*, 76.

3. Maxwell, *Even As I Am*, 73–74.

4. Vanessa Louise, “Tips on How to Flirt,” <<http://mypal.hypermart.net/html/flirt.html>>, November 2000.

5. The full text reads, “And others will he pacify, and lull them away into carnal security, that they will say: All is well in Zion; yea, Zion prospereth, all is well—and thus the devil cheateth their souls, and leadeth them away carefully down to hell. And behold, others he flattereth away, and telleth them there is no hell; and he saith unto them: I am no devil, for there is none—and thus he whispereth in their ears, until he grasps them with his awful chains, from whence there is no deliverance.” For a sense of how “I am no devil” applies to flirting, read that phrase as “there is no harm intended” or “the good outweighs the bad.”