

# Of Our Society

The fatal symptom of our day is not that men do wrong—they always have—and commit crimes, and even recognize their wrongdoing as foolish and unfortunate, but that they have *no intention of repenting*, while God has told us that the first rule that he has given the human race is that all men everywhere must repent.

“Beyond Politics,” 297

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This enervating “mechanical legalistic smoothness” [Solzhenytsin] is nowhere more in evidence than here in our midst, where for years short skirts were modest and long slacks immodest—because the rules said so. Mustaches and beards, mandatory among our grandfather, became by decree carnal, sensual, and devilish. Last week students enrolling in my classes had just one question to ask, “How do we get grades?” Grades are acquisitive, competitive, and phony; but they are the official legal certificates that everyone must have, issued in fixed denominations on mathematically graduated scale, to be converted, it is hoped, hereafter into the legal tender of the land—and that is the only thing that interests these young people in the study of *religion*, of all things!

This is no trifling thing; the seeds of such corruption are all-pervasive.

“Prophetic Book of Mormon,” CWHN 8:456-57

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Was the great last dispensation to be brought on with old shopworn forms and ceremonies? A dispensation is a period of the world’s history during which the church of God with its covenants and ordinances is upon the earth. In the apocalyptic scheme of things it is a comparatively brief period of light following a long period of darkness. What would be an appropriate ensign to announce and inaugurate such a happy time?

The single civilization that embraces the world today, whichever way it turns, sees only itself, a great all-confining cliché in which one can think only of what is being thought and do only what is being done. It cannot imagine a new dispensation, let alone supply one. Like a heavy galleon it labors on into ever-deepening gloom, prodded on its way from time to time by promising puffs of a New Order, New Method, New Education, New Deal, New Life, New Cure, New Light, New Way, etc., but ever and again losing momentum as the fleeting winds quickly blow themselves out, leaving the old scow to wallow on as best it may towards the dawn of nothing. To want something totally new and different is one thing; to supply it is another.

“To Open the Last Dispensation,” 2

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The declining years of ancient civilization were beset by a feverish preoccupation with rhetoric, which suggests nothing so much as a hopeless alcoholic’s devotion to the bottle. Everywhere the ancients give us to understand that rhetoric is their poison, that it is ruining their capacity to work and think, that it disgusts and wearies them, and that they cannot let it alone because it pays too well, and, having destroyed everything else, it is all they have

left of remembered grandeur. It should be immediately apparent that this arresting phenomenon may have more than an academic interest for our own age.

“Victoriosa Loquacitas,” *CWHN* 10:243

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The disease our world is suffering from is not something peculiar to a uniquely scientific and permissive age, but the very same virus that has finished off all the other great societies of which we have record. The ancients call it rhetoric. What it amounts to is the acceptance, for the sake of power and profits, of certain acknowledged standards of lying.

Every profession has these, and all that prevents total collapse of a civilization is an immovable column that stands at the center of everything, a zone of impartial and incorruptible justice guaranteeing the integrity of the entire structure. When those who referee the game become the leading practitioners of deception, the civilization is finished. Nothing stops the corrosive progress of rhetoric once it begins to work, for the highest achievement of the art, the ancients tell us, is that skill which convinces patron, customer, or victim that no rhetoric at all is being used. Its victory is complete when it declares itself abolished. The only counteragent which has had any effect in dealing with this deadly thing is the gospel, which will continue to be effective as long as there are people who read the scriptures for themselves.

Rhetoric, as we shall see, creates an unreal world. That is its great power, like the power of those idols of wood and stone whose appeal was precisely that they could not see or hear but ever remained perfectly compliant to the wishes and purposes of their owners. As with a jet engine, the efficiency of rhetoric steadily increases as its surrounding element approximates more and more to a perfect vacuum. As it destroys the real world around it, the power of rhetoric becomes ever more invincible, moving inexorably towards total supremacy in a total vacuum.

We have almost reached that condition today, for some of our greatest fortunes and mightiest corporations are built not on secret formulas for cola drinks or hamburger patties, but on the conversion of those trifles into symbols of youth, beauty, health, super-fun, family togetherness—the soft caress of a child, the flag unfurled—that is what the rascals are selling, and it is the ultimate triumph of the pure rhetoric in the modern world.

Unpublished introduction to “Victoriosa Loquacitas”

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The case of Lehi teaches us equal respect for thought and action. In our own day thinkers, or technicians, act very little and shun responsibility, while men of action think very little and pride themselves on never finding time to read.

The men of the sixth [century B.C.] and the nineteenth century [A.D.] believed that thinking was more than scheming and planning to get ahead. It was a deep and prayerful contemplation, and they were not ashamed to ask for dreams and visions. The hours they spent alone with the Lord made them mighty in action. . . .

God’s dealings with men are on a scale and in ways that none of us can begin to comprehend. The Lord has favored nations and individuals in times and places we dream not of. So it’s time for us to become aware of this in the twentieth century if we’re to bequeath to history anything greater than commercial jingles.

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Careerism is the determination to reign in hell rather than serve in heaven.

“Patriarchy and Matriarchy,” *CWHN* 1:112

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We think it more commendable to get up at five A.M. to write a bad book than to be up at nine o'clock to write a good one. That is pure zeal that tends to breed a race of insufferable, self-righteous prigs and barren minds. One has only to consider the present outpouring of “inspirational” books in the Church that bring little new in the way of knowledge: truisms, and platitudes, kitsch and clichés have become our everyday diets. . . . We've been assured that it is not too early to start thinking about the things of the eternities. In fact, Latter-day Saints should be taking rapid strides toward setting up that eternal celestial order which the Church must embody to be acceptable to God.

Also, we are repeatedly instructed regarding things we should *not* think about. I would pass this negative thing by lightly, but the scriptures are explicit, outspoken, and emphatic in this matter; and whenever anyone begins to talk about serious matters at the BYU, inevitably someone says, “I would like to spend my time thinking about such things and studying them, but I cannot afford the luxury. I have to think about the really important business of life, which is making a living.”

This is the withering effect of the intimidating challenge thrown out to all of us from childhood: “Do you have any money?” . . . I do not have to tell you where that philosophy came from.

“Zeal Without Knowledge,” *CWHN* 9:75-76

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What are the qualities that make for success in the business world? Hard work, dependability, sobriety, firmness, imagination, patience, courage, loyalty, discrimination, intelligence, persistence, ingenuity, dedication, consecration, etc.—you can add to the list.

But these are the *same* qualities necessary to make a successful athlete, artist, soldier, bank robber, musician, international jewel thief, scholar, hit man, spy, teacher, dancer, author, politician, minister, smuggler, con man, general, explorer, chef, physician, engineer, builder, astronaut, scientist, godfather, inventor. Again, you name it. Too often these attributes of character are represented as unique to the business world, putting a stamp of glory on the man in the executive suite. You don't have to go into business to develop a character.

“Gifts,” *CWHN* 9:102

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Work is, after all, not a busy running back and forth in established grooves, though that is the essence of our modern business and academic life, but the supreme energy and disciplined curiosity required to cut *new* grooves.

“Great Are the Words of Isaiah,” CWHN 1:232

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What a machine can do, that a machine should do. But what remains for us? Science without gadgets! That we can do some things that no machine can or conceivably ever could do—therein lies our true dignity and destiny as human beings. The checking and ushering and bookkeeping, all the automatic and repetitious things that make up the day’s work for most modern men, have no business being done by living people. Some day they may be done as they should be, by machines, and then men can really get down to business.

Yet for most of us such a prospect is simply terrifying. The busywork that rightfully belongs to the machine is the refuge of the timid mind, and it is to the gadgetry of scholarship—the pretentious secretarial tasks of compiling, annotating, copying, checking, abridging, and the rest—that the academic world clings to today with a sort of desperation. Regiments of workers equipped with costly machinery are busy searching out, digging up, acquisitioning, classifying, cataloging, preserving, reproducing, disseminating, explaining, displaying, and even selling the documents of the past—doing every conceivable thing with the documents but reading them!

“The Way of the Church,” CWHN 4:259

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Gadgets have accumulated but brains have not. The world swarms with Ph.D.’s, bright, ambitious men, but there are no great men. For degrees are gadgets and can be turned out in any desired amount.

Administration has become a fine art by the third century, but thinking has become a lost art. The third century B.C. was a world of technicians and educators, but as the educators make their courses easier and easier, the number of competent new technicians being turned out became less and less. The slogans of education for living and education for success completely stifled research within two generations of Aristotle, and soon applied research followed suit. Even the modest minimum quota of technicians failed to reproduce itself, and so the amazingly advanced and sophisticated techniques of the ancients, useful and appreciated as they were, were all completely lost.

Let that be a lesson for us.

“The Lesson of the Sixth Century B.C.,” 13-14

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I have been quite half-hearted . . . and much too easily drawn into what I call the *Gentile Dilemma*. That is, when I find myself called upon to stand up and be counted, to declare myself on one side or the other. Which do I prefer—gin or rum, cigarettes or cigars, tea or coffee, heroin or LSD, the Red Rose or the White, Shiz or Coriantumr, wicked Nephites or wicked Lamanites, Whigs or Tories, Catholic or Protestant, Republican or Democrat, black power or white power, land pirates or sea pirates, commissars or corporations, capitalism or communism.

The devilish neatness and simplicity of the thing is the easy illusion that I am choosing between good and evil, when in reality two or more evils by their rivalry distract my attention from the real issue.

“How Firm a Foundation!” CWHN 9:163

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One of my favorite haunts was the sand dunes near Lynndyl: Utter solitude and the dramatically haunting beauty of the place were wonderfully soothing, refreshing, and inspiring to body and mind. Then suddenly the recreational vehicle market was discovered, and overnight it became a Walpurgis of noise, brawling, drinking, drugs, fights, vandalism, theft, and sex, where mindless youth could run riot with their costly mechanical toys. . .

As the culminating abomination of desolation, we find that corner of “Zion,” which to me always recalls that moving phrase, “Holiness to the Lord,” has now been set apart, “consecrated” as it were, for the fantastic MX game, the ultimate in waste, futility, and desecration of the land.

“How Firm a Foundation!” CWHN 9:162-63

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“Costly apparel” is the mark of wicked and morbid perversion in the Book of Mormon. Notice, not beautiful apparel, but costly apparel—the externalization, the emphasis on the look, the “bouncin’ and behavin’ hair.”

This is a mark of decline in the civilization, culminating in the fourth century when everything was for show. Everything was external. Beauty had to be theatrical.

Many buildings were built, but their construction and design were shoddy and bad; surface was everything, coverings of mosaics, jewels, costly fabrics. Everything had to glitter and gleam.

Take the splendor of the rock concert. No matter what [else] they are, they all glitter—plenty of glitter and the hard beat . . . which lead ultimately to the extinction of the soul. No content is allowed; you can’t think or anything else, the noise just knocks you out.

*Letters to Smoother, Etc., 103*

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What are the things of the eternities that we should consider even now? They are the things that no one ever tires of doing, things in themselves lovely and desirable. . . All the things that are passing away today are the very essence of “the economy,” but they will be missing in Zion. They are already obsolescent. Every one of them is make-work of a temporary and artificial nature for which an artificial demand must be created.

Moreover, few people are really dedicated to them, for as soon as a man has acquired a super-quota of power and gain, he cuts out and leaves the scene of his triumphs, getting as far away as he can from the ugly world he has helped create—preferably to Tahiti.

“Zeal Without Knowledge,” CWHN 9:79-80

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There comes a time when the general defilement of a society becomes so great that the rising generation is put under undue pressure and cannot be said to have a fair choice between the way of light and the way of darkness. When such a point is reached, the cup of iniquity is full, and the established order that has passed the point of no return and neither can nor will change its ways must be removed physically and forcibly if necessary from the earth, whether by war, plague, famine, or upheavals of nature.

“The Flight into the Wilderness,” *CWHN* 6:140

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“There is no free lunch,” says Korihor. “It is all free lunch,” says King Benjamin. . . . *If* lunch is the aim and purpose of life, then Korihor is right. . . . But since I accept the gospel, that’s out of the question. Either we believe that the lunch has been taken care of, or we are in for a long, horrible contest, both internal and external, as to who is going to get the most.

“Gifts,” *CWHN* 9:111

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Mice, cockroaches, elephants, butterflies, and dolphins have all solved the economic problem—their mere existence on earth after thousands of years of vicissitudes is adequate proof that they have found the secret of survival. Can we do no better than to dedicate all our time and energy to solving just that one problem, as if our whole object in life were simply lunch? . . .

For today many a TV documentary will show you the beasts of the field not spending their days perpetually seeking out and consuming each other for lunch, as we have been taught, but in pleasant relaxation, play, family fun, bathing, exploring (for many of them have lively curiosity), grooming, sparring, and much happy napping, and so on. Even the most efficient killers hunt only every few days when they are really hungry, kill only weaker members of the herds (thus strengthening the stock), and never take more than they need, usually sharing it with others. We see leopards, lions, and tigers between meals calming loping through herds of exotic ungulates, who hardly bother to look up from their grazing at the passing visitors. It is only the human predator who keeps a twenty-four-hour lookout for victims in the manner prescribed in the flourishing contemporary success literature.

“Work We Must, But the Lunch Is Free,” *CWHN* 9:236

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[Freemen] were not militant. It took a great deal to stir them to action, and they made war with heavy reluctance and without rancor, always keeping the fighting to a minimum. They were peace-loving, noncompetitive, and friendly, appealing to the power of the word above that of the sword. “Taught never to give offense,” and never aggressive, they were terrible indeed when the king-men pushed them too far, but quick to spare and forgive.

They were not class-conscious, but prized equality among the greatest of blessings. In their personal lives they placed no great value on the accumulation of wealth and abhorred displays of status and prestige, e.g., the wearing of fashionable and expensive clothes.

Eschewing ambition, they were not desirous or envious of power and authority. They recognized that they were “despised” by the more success-oriented king-men and thought of themselves as outcasts from the ways of the world. They shunned the climate of secrecy and conspiracy in which the king-men delighted, and avoided aristocratic pretenses and aspirations as well. They sought the solution to all their problems in fervid prayer and repentance.

Q. It sounds rather boring to me—too idealistic and unrealistic.

A. Yes, that is the way it seems to us. We have disqualified ourselves for that kind of life. Nothing short of a fix moves our jaded and overstimulated appetites any more. But may I point out to you that there are still a few societies left on earth, or were until recently, in which the freemen’s way of life survived. I am thinking of certain societies of American Indians and Pacific Islanders.

Q. Come now! They are nature-people, savages.

A. By us they are “despised,” to use Moroni’s expression. But what stable societies from the New England village to the ancient dwellers on the Nile have not been “nature people,” gladly accepting the world that God has given them? It is only in our own day that the bulldozers, freeways, high-rises, parking prairies, shopping palaces, and industrial “parks” have claimed the land in the name of great combinations dedicated to power and gain. And in that denatured and dehumanized setting modern man finds satisfaction in watching, reading, and living out those stories of contention, violence, intrigue, duels for power, grand theft, murder, high fashion, and high sex which have become the daily fare of the millions as they once were for *money* is the name of the game.

But there is a ray of hope in the circumstance that the freemen and the king-men belong to the same race and culture. It is quite possible for people to move from one category to the other, as they often do in the Book of Mormon, where “one very wicked man” can get a huge following in short order and just as quickly lose it. We are all both king-men and freemen at heart, just as we are all potential devils or gods.

“Freemen and King-men,” CWHN 8:371-72

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Apostasy never came by renouncing the gospel but always by corrupting it. No one renounces it today, and so we have the strange paradox of people stoutly proclaiming beliefs and ideals that they have no intention of putting into practice.

1. Every Sunday we thank God for our beautiful surroundings, which in many neighborhoods are being systematically destroyed by developers all around us.
2. We seek knowledge as our greatest treasure, while the poverty of most of our manuals and handbooks defies description.
3. As a Church authority commented to me after the last Conference, the President’s keynote address on the Book of Mormon was hardly mentioned during the rest of the Conference.
4. For years we hailed the Welfare Plan as a living demonstration of continued revelation—and then phased it out in deference to the private sector.

5. Since the days of Joseph Smith, presidents of the Church have made resounding pronouncements against the wicked practice of needlessly killing animals and birds for pleasure, and have been unheeded; we have just passed a law permitting fourteen-year-olds the pleasure of killing big game.

6. A great and inspired bicentennial message by one we called our prophet was instantly swept under the rug.

7. The oldest and best testimony to Joseph Smith's first vision has received no attention whatever by the Latter-day Saints since its discovery in 1969, and so it goes.

8. The prophet Joseph studied biblical languages with dedicated zeal to help him understand the scriptures, but such studies are frowned upon by too many in our religious institutions.

"One Eternal Round," *CWHN* 12:395-96