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Relational Learning Theory: An Effective Integrative Bridge Between the Sacred and the Secular in Therapy

Garth L. Allred, Ph.D

The early Saints who settled that quintessential Mormon community of Laie, on the Hawaiian Island of Oahu, recognized the need to integrate the academic and the spiritual. These pioneers of the Pacific went so far as to lay out two of their streets in such a way as to dramatize a unification of the sacred and the secular. The street running directly from the Temple toward the ocean is called Hale Laa, or “House of Light.” The street running from the Church College of Hawaii, now known as BYU-Hawaii, is named Kula nui, meaning “Big House.” The confluence of these streets forms a large circle near Temple Beach. From the air, the streets would be seen as a giant V, or a huge compass attached at the bottom to a large circle. This esoteric mapping of streets appears eccentric to the uninitiated but the symbolism is glaringly obvious to any adult practicing Latter-day Saint.

Sometimes we Mormon therapists are not as determined at unification as were those early settlers of Laie. Occasionally we are accused of preaching for doctrine the commandments of men, mingling them, of course, with a smattering of scripture—to provide a form of godliness but still denying the power thereof. I think we are guilty of that charge unless we honestly seek to integrate secular knowledge with what has been given by prophets, both ancient and modern. Both therapeutic theory and practice can and ought to be better screened through the mesh of generally recognized and accepted gospel principles. The teachings of the Church have helped many of us sort through and single out appropriate and effective therapeutic concepts and procedures. On
the other hand, we must admit that many important principles have come also by way of the “Gentiles.”

Robert F. Bennet and his associates at the Relational Learning Center (Bennet, 1987) suggest that each of us see the world through a system of beliefs which they call, by way of metaphor, a “belief window.” We live our lives by the principles we have written upon our belief windows. We act in accordance with our beliefs or expectations for a return. Belief precedes action. In this regard, belief and faith are similar motivators. What is said of belief can also be said of faith. Dennis F. Rasmussen (1990), associate professor of Philosophy at Brigham Young University, has suggested that:

Even actions performed by habit, which seem to involve no aim, were not always so. They were once subject to choice, and they became habits by choice, even if the choice was simply a passive refusal to prevent them. To choose something actively means to pursue it as an end to be achieved in the future, even if that future reaches no further ahead of the present than a brief moment. An action is voluntary, chosen, done on purpose. The aim of actions may vary, but every action has an aim, some result intended. Because faith is the principle of action, action has faith as its source. Action is faith at work; without faith, there would be no action.

In the words of the first Lecture on Faith, taught and approved by the Prophet Joseph Smith, we read that:

If men were duly to consider themselves and turn their thoughts and reflections to the operations of their own minds, they would readily discover that it is faith, and faith only, which is the moving cause of all action in them; that without it both mind and body would be in a state of inactivity, and all their exertions would cease, both physical and mental (Lectures on Faith 1:10).

Belief windows can be collective as well as individual. The insiders of one group will sometimes not consider the worth of an outsider’s idea because it did not originate within their group. Sometimes religionists will not consider the ideas of therapists. Sometimes therapists will not consider the ideas of religionists. This, unfortunately, is too often the case.

From the writings of Nephi we read: “Cursed is he that putteth his trust in man, or maketh flesh his arm, or shall hearken unto the
precepts of men, save their precepts shall be given by the power of the Holy Ghost” (2 Nephi 28:31). From this passage we can conclude that some precepts of men are given by the power of the Holy Ghost. That being the case, we Latter-day Saint therapists have a responsibility to sift and seek through ideas and principles that exist in the world and bring home to Zion that which is “virtuous, lovely, or of good report and praiseworthy” for “we seek after these things”—whatever their source.

My thesis in this presentation is that educational learning theory, especially Relational Learning theory can serve as an effective integrative bridge joining the sacred and the secular in therapy.

Relational Learning theorists suggest that learning is best facilitated when teachers (therapists) help students (clients) to: (1) See patterns that repeat themselves; (2) Extract principles and see their contrasting principles; (3) Make connections in other contexts; (4) Become empowered to make wise decisions; and, (5) Experience peace and happiness in this world and eternal life in the world to come (see Doctrine and Covenants 59:23).

Too often what happens today in educational as well as therapeutic contexts is simply informational learning and is centered in analysis of parts. Memorization of categories, applying labels and being able to so classify behaviors and thought patterns is heavily emphasized. Relational Learning, by way of contrast, focuses on helping students (or clients) to see patterns that repeat themselves, extract principles and their contrasting principles, and then make connections with these principles in their own lives. Nephi referred to such a process when he said, “For I did liken all scriptures unto us, that it might be for our profit and learning” (1 Nephi 19:23). Once clients are able to make connections between abstract principles and their own lives, they can then establish bridges to many other contexts and make connections there also. They see these same principles operating in the lives of their parents, employers, and neighbors. The principles might apply the same to fishing, athletics, as to scriptural stories.
From the *Teacher Development Manual* we read:

The basic goal of teaching in the Church is to help bring about worthwhile changes in the lives of people. The aim is to inspire the individual to think about, feel about, and then do something about gospel truths and principles.

It is useful to view therapists as educators having similar goals. When such is the case, effective therapists/educators will be skilled both in content and process—or, in other words, both in principles and methodology.

A therapist's instructional methods should provide for the highest levels of cognitive and spiritual processes. While it may be sometimes helpful to have clients categorize and memorize such thought patterns and behaviors such as *vicious cycles, divine discontent, anxiety, depression, inhibition* and the like, higher order learning is much more useful. While some informational learning may be necessary in therapy, it is not sufficient to enable the client to be self correcting and self healing. Understanding concepts and principles with their contrasting concepts and principles and then making connections in various contexts facilitates a much higher order of learning and healing.

We learn the meaning of abstract principles by way of specific examples. A therapist should use such examples in efforts to instruct the client. Examples may be given by way of stories, anecdotes, allegories, metaphors, and similes. Who can forget Carlfred Broderick's example of comparing his attempting to intervene between hostile spouses to poking a stick into the spinning spokes of an upside down bicycle wheel. Metaphor can also be very helpful, but the meaning must be clear or no learning will take place. For example, Isaiah's imagery in 3 Nephi 22:1 regarding a husband, fruitful and barren wives, would be meaningless unless one understood that Isaiah was making reference to Jesus, the Church, and the latter-day gathering of Israel.

A therapist will help clients see patterns that repeat themselves. Seeing patterns helps clients predict future events. Once clients can see patterns, they can then see their part in a collusion cycle and also predict, with the help of the therapist, what will happen if they make various choices.
From cognitive and behavioral patterns therapists help clients extract principles and see contrasting principles. Therapists help clients understand such principles as: “for every action there is a reaction,” “ask and we shall receive,” “if we are one, we are the Lord’s;” “if this . . . then that.” Joseph Smith said that we do not understand a principle unless we understand its opposite. Accordingly, therapists also help clients understand that “no action brings no reaction,” “if we do not ask, we do not receive,” “if we are not one, we are not the Lord’s,” and “if we don’t do this . . . then we don’t get that.”

Knowledge of principles in a gospel context will facilitate clients making connections in a therapy context. For instance, Joseph Smith taught that “we can be saved no faster than we gain knowledge.” Some therapy connections to that principle might be the idea that therapy is an educational process by which clients can gain knowledge, and that we can learn new ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. By contrast, when clients resist learning new ideas and say they can’t change, it may mean that they either don’t know how to change or they don’t want to change. Therapists may be able to help with the former, but they find it difficult to help those who are closed and choose not to learn new ways of relating.

Another example of bridging from gospel to therapy comes from the Doctrine and Covenants. From it we learn that “there is a law upon which all blessings are predicated.” A therapy connection might be that “If I learn new communication skills, I can improve my marital happiness.” A contrasting principle would be: “If we are not receiving certain blessings, it is because we are not obeying the correct law.” A contrasting connection might be, “If I don’t learn new communication skills, my marriage may continue to stagnate.”

Another example of going from gospel to therapy is the important Book of Mormon principle that “man is free to act.” Therapy connections have us understand that “we can choose our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.” Or “no blame allowed: we are about as happy as we choose to be.” A contrasting principle is that some brands of psychology would have us believe that “man is
simply a reactor," and the connection we often hear in therapy, "You mean you expect me to be happily married to a man like that?"

Knowledge of principles from a therapy context will facilitate clients making connections in a gospel context. This can be seen in Parson's spiral of therapeutic processes. Parson holds that "establishing rapport with a client is a prerequisite to achieving change." Gospel connections might be: "he that preacheth and he that receiveth understand one another" and "no power or influence can or ought to be maintained . . . only by persuasion." A contrasting principle is "no rapport, no change." This is likened to some Church leaders who moralize without rapport and wonder why change does not take place among their people.

Another example of going from therapy to gospel is Broderick's therapeutic triangle principle. "Each spouse must feel equally accepted and supported by the therapist." Gospel connections are obvious: "Judge not unrighteous judgment," and "I will forgive whom I will, but of you it is required to forgive all men." A contrasting principle would be: "Loss of symmetry is a loss of effectiveness." Gospel connections might be: "My disciples forgave not one another, and for this were sorely chastened."

A final example of going from therapy to the gospel is found in the process of therapeutic intervention. "If you want another person to change, you may have to change the way you relate to them." Gospel connections might be: "As I have loved you, love one another," and Christ's charge to "return good for evil." Can you think of other connections? If you can, you are beginning to understand how relational learning takes place.

Principles remain abstractions until clients can make connections in their own world. Until that takes place, there is no insight. Once a connection is made and the light turns on, they then can make connections in many other contexts.

The Ah Ha! experience is a client's recognition reflex.

A clinician's therapeutic lead can be too close or too distant in either the affective or the cognitive domains and the client will not
be able to gain the spark or insight so important to the self-correcting and self-healing process.

This idea of making connections from gospel or therapy contexts ties in with a statement by the Prophet Joseph Smith. He said, "the spirit of revelation is in connection with these blessings"—of ultimately seeing the Lord! "A person may profit by noticing the first intimation of the spirit of revelation; for instance, when you feel pure intelligence flowing into you, it may give you sudden strokes of ideas." I believe that Ah Ha! experience is a form of revelation. Making connections between principles, from whatever source, is a form of revelation.

Alma explained how we can tell if a principle is true or if our connections are accurate. He said, a true seed or principle will "swell within our breasts, enlarge our souls, enlighten our understanding, and become delicious to us."

The ability to make connections from one context to another empowers us and our clients to become self-correcting and self-healing. When crossroads are encountered, if we have an assortment of principles to operate from then we are in a position to make wise decisions. The greater the selection, the more control we will have of our lives.

In conclusion: I believe that educational learning theory, especially Relational Learning theory, can serve as an effective integrative bridge in combining principles from both secular and sacred sources.

References
