

Creative Destruction

Or, How to Renovate Your Religion

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<http://mccue.cc/bob/spirituality.htm>

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The search for truth implies a duty. One must not conceal any part of what one has recognized to be true. Albert Einstein

Introduction

One of the things that I have puzzled over for more hours than I care to remember during the past year and a half is why very intelligent people within the Mormon community are so resistant to information that makes it clear that they should not trust their religious leaders, and in the face of the information continue to trust them. Part of the answer to that questions in the well developed literature related to cognitive dissonance. Some of that is summarized at <http://mccue.cc/bob/spirituality.htm> under the "post mormon" button in essays titled "Religious Faith ..." and "The Mormon Use of Persuasive Technique". Two other excellent sources of information are Aronson, "The Social Animal" (9th Ed.) and Levine, "The Power of Persuasion".

This morning another little piece in the puzzle fell into place, hence this note. As usual, I feel the need to keep track of how this idea came to me, and so you will have to suffer through some background.

The Importance of Creative Destruction

I am a believer in the usefulness of creative destruction. That concept is at the core of the capitalist system, aspects of agriculture, biology and the most productive parts of the learning process used by science and other powerful knowledge producers.

Let me provide a few examples.

1. If I want to grow hay in a field formerly in virgin prairie condition, it is unwise just to plough up the prairie and seed to hay. The old prairie grasses, thistles, etc. will keep coming up, the hay will not properly take, and I will end up with a mongrel crop that is close to useless. My crop will be "neither hot nor cold", or is "new wine in old bottles", to use other analogies whose probative value I question because of their source, but still habitually use. In any event, the problem with my hay in the example above results from not properly destroying the old before planting the new. So, what I should do if I want hay is use RoundUp on the entire field – kill everything in it – and then after a suitable time, plough and plant hay. Then I will get hay.

2. If part of our economy is weak (the steel industry, let's say) as long as it is subsidized by the government, it will suck in and consume resources. These resources will include

money (including the money the government gives it as a subsidy) and people. Older people will remain employed there. But, more importantly, young people will continue to invest in education and other forms of training in order to earn jobs in that industry. If the industry is allowed to fail, some people will become unemployed and never be employed again at a similar level, and hence will lose something of significance. But many other people (young people particularly) will be retrained and move into jobs with a much brighter future. And most importantly, educational and capital and other resources will be shifted toward more productive opportunities. So, as long as we leave the "sick" industry around, many changes that will have a long term, positive effect will not occur while the frightening, painful necessity created by allowing a business, or entire industry to fail will cause a reallocation of resources, learning etc. that will likely create many positive things in the mid to long term.

3. False ideas have a similar effect to oats in a field designated for hay, or a sick industry in an economy. As long as I believe that black people are a sub-human species, I am unlikely to treat them well and unlikely to be able to see many wonderful possibilities both for them and for me in my relationship with them. As long as I believe that women are fundamentally limited as to what they can or should do (not hold the priesthood; must stay at home and raise children on a full time basis; etc.) I will be unable to see many possibilities both for the women with whom I associate, and for myself in relation to them. Change in behavior can only occur as false ideas of this nature are eradicated.

Countless other examples of this type could be supplied from the worlds of agriculture, biology, education, and elsewhere.

The destructive phase of the "creative destruction" process is seldom pleasant, especially for those whose oxen (or sacred cows) are being gored. But even they often live to bless that destructive day. Retrained forestry workers who have high tech jobs instead of wielding chain saws are much better off in the long term, and many of them freely acknowledge this. A rehabilitated chauvinist (like me, at least in part) is often much happier with his new way of seeing other people. And, I have found within my family and marriage that the pain caused by the destruction of inadequate (or downright misleading) beliefs has produced many good things for us. My children, wife and I are much more broad minded than we were; we have a much better chance of engaging reality down the road; etc. I also acknowledge that many who have gone through the creative destruction process feel that they have been irreparably harmed, and a certain amount of that is the price we are required to pay for the good of future generations.

I like analogies, but recognize that they are often misleading. Nonetheless, I have already referred to several. These analogies are potentially misleading because the fact that creative destruction seems helpful to the functioning of capitalist economics and certain aspects of agriculture and biology does not mean that it would aid constructive changes in religious belief and related behavior. However, the manner in which I think it can be shown that bad ideas of a certain type restrain our ability to absorb and use good ideas that are inconsistent with the bad fits so well with our ordinary experience

that I do not think it can be reasonably disputed. And, I think this justifies the use of creative destruction relative to changes in religious belief. Hence, I suggest that we can learn useful things from considering how creative destruction works in a variety of contexts, and then profitably apply them to the process of changing our religious beliefs.

How Fast?

If too much destruction occurs too quickly, the system that hosts the destruction may itself be destroyed. This is not a concern if you are killing wild grass to make room for hay because Roundup was designed not to harm the host organism – the soil and related ecology. But think of the Russian economy and its transition from communism to capitalism. Too much "bad" infrastructure was eliminated without the provision of anything to take its place. The result was chaos that was used by lawless elements of Russian society to their advantage. The Chinese, at more or less the same time, lied for years about the attitude respecting capitalism (bad, bad, bad, never, never, never) while experimenting with it in relatively small ways in Southern China. When they saw that things were working out well from their point of view (capitalism was producing good things, and could be controlled by the communist party) they surprisingly and suddenly announced that a mixed capitalist/planned economy was a good thing, and that is the road they have gone down since. Their deceptive practices were straight out of the LDS faithful history/philosopher king playbook, but appear (relative to what happened in Russia at least) to have served a useful purpose. The same kind of time buying transition could in many cases be achieved by doling out the truth in digestible chunks, without trying to tell the whole story at once. The same kind of thing is seen in radiation therapy for cancer patients. A balance is struck between the desire to kill as much of the cancer as possible, and the need to allow the patient enough strength to regenerate after treatment.

Perceived Necessity

Because the "destruction" part of the creative destruction process is painful, we avoid it. In our economy, for example, sick companies do not volunteer for bankruptcy in the interest of the greater good. And in fact, companies that should die to make room for something better will fight tooth and nail for their survival, and in some cases are subsidized by foolish governments. See the "old" part of the US steel industry for a classic example of this. In the religious context, this is precisely what the LDS church is doing. Faithful history is part of its fight. It will do things to harm its members in order to make its own survival more likely. Why and how that happens is another story that relates to how organizations develop collective minds that are different from and beyond the view of any individual mind. But I digress.

In our personal lives, something analogous occurs. We can't recognize which parts of our lives need retooling, and there is nothing like the economy that functions so as to impose the necessities that would trim away the dead parts of our souls to make room for new growth. From time to time, however, things happen that create the kind of necessity that the economy imposes on sick companies, and in response we change.

And sometimes we are even aware enough of what is happening that we consciously participate in this process respecting our own lives or the lives of others.

For example, I am close to 100% certain that as far as the beliefs of my children and wife are concerned, if I did not create a situation in which there was something significant perceived to be at stake, nothing would change and so the bad status quo would win by default. This is because the LDS Church is a big, heavy force in the lives of its members. Many hours each week are spent in meetings, reading scriptures, praying etc. all in aid of keeping Mormon beliefs in operating in the lives of faithful Mormons. If that process is not disrupted, it will continue because of its cultural weight and momentum.

Because I have chosen to let those within my family know of my change in belief, and to state my objection (without imposing a prohibition) respecting a wide variety of Mormon related activities, I have created a counterbalancing force to Mormonism in our home. This requires that my family take action. They can either resist my influence (as some are) or they can go along with me. My actions that have required them to make this choice can fairly be said to have created disharmony in our home – an unpleasant situation that I hope lasts as short a time as possible. However, I think that this disharmony is the lesser of evils. It would have been far worse to have sat back and allowed the bad status quo to win.

It is when things are not working that the incentive for change is most likely to exist. The disharmony I just mentioned is evidence that things are not working. It is the roughly equivalent losing money if you are in business – a clear sign that things are not going as they should. The more important the things that are not working, the more likely change is to occur. The perception of necessity focuses the mind and brings resources to light that are otherwise invisible, inert etc. Even today I am amazed at what is happening to me at the office. A necessity within our law firm has arisen. I feel the energy required to deal with it coming out of nowhere. This is how life works.

I also note that we choose or create (by default sometimes) many of our most important necessities. I realize that this seems to be a contradiction in terms. For example, I have recently decided that some things I did not previously regard as necessities within my marriage are important enough that I now regard them to be such. One is that I will no longer tolerate the uncontested teaching of wilful ignorance in my home. And I actively and regularly teach the importance of perspective, seeking information about the Church and other things, questioning authority (the Church's and other) on almost a daily basis. Our kids will have at least some chance then to decide what they want on an informed basis. As noted above, my actions in this regard create necessities to which my wife and other family members must respond, and the disharmony I have already noted as well. I should also say that many things are better than they have ever been in my home. My 9 year old son counts time from when "Dad was mean". That is, while I was a faithful Mormon we had a lot of rules at our house related to going to meetings, family rituals (like Family Home Evening, family prayer, reading scriptures, father's interviews, etc.) and now we focus much more on doing what we feel like we

want to do from time to time. The 9 year old thinks that is a much better way to live, as do all family members in some ways, and most family members in almost all ways. Other good things have happened too, but I am well past the time allotted to type this already, and so will move on.

Another example of how we sometimes create necessity for ourselves is apparent (I believe) in how I left the Church. I wrote a letter to friends and family (a three pager) indicating that I had heard distorted rumors of my apostasy and indicating that I wanted to clear the air. That letter quickly put me in a position in which I felt compelled to resign my membership. This surprised me. As I look back on it, I should not have been surprised. I think my subconscious realized that I needed to get out, and "set me up" so that I would do what I was not consciously prepared to admit I needed to do. I created my own necessity, in effect. Psychological studies have shown that this is a common human behavior.

Cognitive Dissonance

As noted above, cog dis is a powerful force that prevents us from seeing what we need to change in our lives. However, it is also a key to creating change. By forcing the issue to an extent as described above, I am using cognitive dissonance in a constructive way. The disharmony family members feel is a form of cognitive dissonance. I also expose them to as much information as they will allow me to that indicates the Mormon Church's behaviour contradicts the moral rules it teaches. Chastity is important? Lets talk about Joseph Smith's (JS) history of having sex with other mens' wives and young girls, or about the US leading rate of rape in Utah and particularly Provo. Honesty is important? Lets talk about JS and other LDS leaders' history as liars, and faithful history (the Church's program of suppressing and distorting its own history). Education is important? Lets talk about faithful history. Freewill is important? Lets talk about how controlling LDS culture and religious leadership is. Women are "equal"? Lets talk about Prozac use and depression among women in Utah, and Utah's US leading rate of spousal abuse claims. Mormons are successful because God blesses righteous behavior? Lets talk about rates of white collar fraud, multilevel marketing and personal bankruptcies in Utah. Etc.

Cog dis is also a product of the creative side of the process. Here is a sampling of the kind of voices I hope can heard in my kids' heads on the positive side of things. "Dad is a lot more fun now." "Dad takes me places where I learn neat things." "I keep hearing things at school and elsewhere that I did not notice before that agree with what Dad says." "Dad seems to be more interested in me than before. He is not at church meetings, and he does more with me." "That is odd. I feel more 'spiritual' when I talk about science, culture etc. with Dad than when I am at church." "When I see people talking about how they know things that I don't think they can know, I have to agree that Dad is right – that is not a very wise way to make important decisions". Cog dis arises in this context from the dawning realization that, "Since Dad is an apostate, devoid of God's spirit, he sure seems to be hitting the nail on the head more often that he should. Hmmm. Maybe ..."

I think most people in situations similar to mine do not go nearly as far as they can with respect to the use of cog dis as an attitude shaping, or "educational", tool. Why? Because we are afraid of what we might lose in terms of our relationships, and so we don't rock the boat. In general, relationships will bear much more weight than we think, particularly if we increase the amount of love we show, and time and effort we spend, to enhance our relationships in other ways while subjecting them to stress in the fashion I have just suggested.

Cultural Learning

Another aspect of the "why is it so hard to change" matrix relates to the manner in which we learn cultural habits. The formation of culture is a fascinating topic. An accessible summary with regard to a variety of things in this regard can be found here <http://www.dan.sperber.com/mitecs.htm>

Humans in a group quickly develop behaviors unique to that group. These include manners of dress, speech, posture, food and music preference, etc. Anthropologists and other social scientists believe this universal human tendency relates to the importance in our evolutionary environment of being able to recognize who was a member of your group, and who was not. The fashion industry is built on this instinct.

Because of the immense subtlety of human culture, it is one of those things than can only be learned completely during a process that begins early in life. For example, linguists have shown that the facility with which a foreign language will be learned can be predicted by when a person starts to learn. Full fluency can rarely be achieved if learning starts after a relatively early age. But, as long as its starts before about 20, almost complete mastery can be achieved, albeit with an accent. If learning starts after 40, mastery is likely to never make it past the halting stage. That is, our mental cement hardens with respect to language skills. The same is true for certain musical skills. Other learning processes are similar.

While I confess that I have not found any academic research to back me up yet (I have not yet looked either) I suggest that the same thing is true respecting religious beliefs that have achieved the degree of cultural integration that Mormonism have. Immigrants who came to North America as adults will always long for the "old country", and gravitate toward events at which their native music is played, language spoken and food eaten. I suggest that adult, fully conditioned Mormons who have "leave the faith" will be similarly afflicted. We have been acculturated to the point as Mormons that we will we never be able to absorb another other religious culture (or any culture) in the same comprehensive, deep way. Some things Mormon will, hence, always resonate with us, even if in the negative. We will always think, and act, with a Mormon accent. In this regard, I think it fair to regard Mormonism as an acculturated permanent disability, like something that would result from glue sniffing (OK, that was hyperbolic, but only a bit) and on that basis alone I want to keep it as far away from my kids as possible.

I have written a lot about how I am now trying to "rewire" my brain. And I believe that this is possible. But the more I study how this should work, the more clear it seems to

me that there are limits to how far this can go, and that I am setting myself up for disappointment if I am not realistic about this project. And perhaps I can use my Mormon "accent" to my advantage. I should naturally seek groups that value what I value, for example. The values I was taught that Mormonism stood for are good in most respects. For example, I value telling the truth. I value honesty. I value being faithful to my wife, and living up the promises I made to her and my children. I value education. I value seeking to connect with reality to the greatest extent possible. And I thought Mormonism valued all of these things too. I was wrong in that regard.

I seek groups that walk Mormonism's talk (or at least the part of it I just described). And while I have found a few such groups (the Universalist Unitarians come pretty close in some ways), their cultures bear little resemblance to Mormon culture – the only one I "speak" with fluency. This is the case because Mormon culture is artificial in the following sense - it speaks of seeking the truth, then tells us what the truth is and requires that we believe it, and if we don't believe it we are told not to voice our dissent. Most Mormons follow these rules, which makes for the odd situation of a group of people most of whom think they are truth seekers, but who also think that they have found the truth and hence no longer seek it. Mormons are, in effect, former truth seekers who talk about those who came before, sought the truth, and found it. And so there is no discussion about what the "truth" is. Someone else already answered that question. What I find now is that groups of truth seekers are usually pretty unruly. There is lots of disagreement as to what the truth is, because no one knows for sure, nor can they. So, the look and feel of such groups – their culture – is very different from Mormon culture.

What I just described brings us nose to nose with an unpleasant reality – if we destroy our Mormon culture, we cannot fully replace it. This explains some things to me that have puzzled me immensely. I know a number of people who are fully informed with respect to the problems with Mormon history and the foibles of current leaders, and even appear to understand the many benefits of leaving Mormonism in favor of some other kind of much more healthy spiritual path. And in the face of all that, they choose not only to leave their names on the LDS Church's membership rolls, but to continue to actively participate. Some indicate that they feel, despite all they know, that God's place for them is in Mormonism. Others, who have rejected the notion of a personal God, stay because they feel a mystic pull of some kind that they cannot explain but that they say indicates that the Mormon church is simply where they belong. And finally some – arguably the most self aware of the group – indicate that in spite of Mormonism's manifest failings and the advantages other groups offer, they choose to continue to associate with the Mormon people within the only context they can – that offered by the Mormon Church. The manner in which culture is learned and cannot be replaced explains this behavior to me. Many of these people have left and come back, with the rationalizations above. They are hardwired Mormon by their Mormon cultural learning that can't be unlearned or replaced.

Cultural Inertia and Evolutionary Theory

The engrained nature of culture, and the investment required to change it creates something that might be called "cultural inertia". In this regard, anthropologist Elman Service articulated what he called the "law of evolutionary potential." He noted that certain societies wanted to evolve in new directions but were tied down by certain aspects of their culture. For example, the Egyptians got to the point of wanting a less cumbersome, phonetic alphabet for writing but were tied in many ways to their hieroglyphic system. It took a different civilization, the Phoenicians, to come up with the phonetic alphabet. A few thousand years later, the U.S. virtually destroyed the Japanese steel industry, requiring the Japanese to rebuild (with US help of course) with the most modern equipment. This set the stage for the Japanese steel industry to eclipse the US.

I find further support the ideas just described in evolutionary theory in the biological context, and as it is being extended in attempts to better under cultural change. This from pp. 38, 39 of David Sloan Wilson's "Darwin's Cathedral", a book I highly recommend. The square bracketed additions are mine:

"Fitness [in the evolutionary sense] is a relative concept. It doesn't matter how well an organism survives and reproduces. It only matters that it scurvies and reproduces better than alternative types of organisms. Males of some species are adapted to kill infants, which enables them to mate with the infants' mothers faster than they could otherwise (Van Schaik and Janson 2000). This behavior is not adaptive for the infants, the mothers, the group, the species, or the ecosystem. It is adaptive only for the males, compared to males who behave otherwise. Nevertheless, these males must be regarded as fit from an evolutionary perspective. Some species of bees have evolved to drink nectar without becoming dusted with pollen, by chewing a hole in the base of the flower. This behavior is not adaptive for the flower-bearing plants or even the bee species, which depends upon the plants for its long term survival. It is adaptive only for the individual bee, compared to bees who behave otherwise. It is hard to avoid a feeling of moral revulsion at calling such behaviors fit when they are so destructive to other organisms and even the "fit" organism itself over the long term. As we have seen, group selection is a partial solution to this problem. Groups of males who do not kill each other's infants might survive and reproduce better than other groups. The feeling of moral revulsion that I just described can itself be explained as part of the innate psychology of moral systems that evolved by group selection to suppress self-serving behaviors in our own species. But alas, group selection merely takes us out of the frying pan of within-group interactions and into the fire of between-group interactions. Those groups of males who do not kill each other's offspring might well kill the offspring and appropriate the females from other groups (Wranham and Peterson 1997).

These points must be kept firmly in mind when we proceed to our study of religion. Whenever I strike up a conversation about religion, I am likely to receive a litany of evils perpetrated in God's name. In most cases, these are horror

committed by religious groups against other groups. How can I call religion adaptive in the face of such evidence? The answer is “easily”, as long as we understand fitness in relative terms. It is important to stress that a behaviors can be explained from an evolutionary perspective without being morally condoned. Immoral behaviors almost invariably benefit the immoral individual or group; why else would immorality be a temptation? Evolution is not required to tell us something so basic. Religious discussions of self-will are a breath away from evolutionary discussions of self-interest. Open-minded religious believers are perfectly aware that solving the problem of self-will within religious groups can lead to even greater problems of group-will with respect to other groups. These parallels between religious and evolutionary thought are not coincidental; they both spring from the fundamental problem of social life and its partial solution that lies at the heart of religion and which can be explained by multilevel [evolutionary] selection theory.

Not only is fitness a relative concept, but it is a local concept [and finally we get to the point directly relevant to Service – the rest was necessary background to this point]. The English system of measuring in feet and inches is inferior to the metric system, but it persists in certain populations because it is common. The cost of switching to the metric system outweighs the benefits, at least over the short term. This is known as the majority effect, and examples abound in both biological and cultural evolution. IBM-compatible computers have an advantage over Apple computers and Microsoft Word has an advantage over other word processing systems because of the majority effect. These examples do not violate the principle of evolution as a fitness maximizing process but simply illustrate its local nature. Imagine the English measurement system as a meager hill of low fitness and the metric system as a taller hill of high fitness. Evolution is a hill climbing process, but it starts out on the slope of the meager hill, all it can do is climb to the top of that hill. Moving from a short hill to a tall hill requires crossing a valley of low fitness and is actually resisted by the evolutionary process. The more rugged the adaptive landscape, the more an evolving system will reflect its original starting point (the particular hill upon whose slope it landed) and will fail to find the best global solution.”

There was a footnote in this block of text that is also worth reproducing here. Footnote 22 indicates:

Sewall Wright thought that group selection could turn evolution in rugged adaptive landscapes into a creative process. Although a single population might become “trapped” on a give peak, multiple populations might occupy different peaks and those occupying the highest peak might eventually out-compete the others. The ruggedness of adaptive landscapes and the feasibility of Wright’s “shifting balance theory” are still hotly debated (Coyne, Barton and Turelli 1997, 2000; Wade and Goodnight 1998). Boyd and Richerson (1992) have developed a similar idea for social evolution, which they call groups selection among multiple evolutionary stable strategies.

Creative Destruction and Cultural Change

So, what does the concept of cultural learning have to say to us respecting how we should use creative destruction? I am just starting to think about this, so my comments are embryonic.

First, I note that the concept of the evolutionary landscape explains nicely why some workers are retrained and some not during the course of creative economic destruction; and why the young tend to retrain and the old not. The cost of retraining the old does not justify the benefits they and their employers can gain from that retraining. This is not to say that the old should be simply thrown aside. Society should assume part of the burden of their care in light of the necessity of this process, and hence the necessity of imposing these burdens on many people who have no control over their own destinies in this regard.

Second, the Church seems to me a to be a bit like the males who kill the young of other males in the sense that it has developed, as an organism, behaviors that are highly adaptive for it (make the org stronger, etc.) while being maladaptive to many other organisms (like us) related to it. The "Matrix" metaphor comes from this font, and has spawned a "Motrix" counterpart.

The concept of the evolutionary landscape simply explains why this strategy is effective. The Church can, in effect, create much of the ruggedness that we experience as we try to "get out". Much LDS ideology can be explained, in my view, on this basis. For example, families are only "forever" if you obey Mormon authority. This single concept is likely responsible for destroying more marriages in which one spouse stops believing than any other. The reality that many Mormon marriages end when one spouse no longer believes is part of that rocky view from the low hills of Mormonism for many who gaze wistfully at the glorious peaks around them that gradually as life passes emerge from the fog. By increasing the cost of getting out, the Church brings to bear the forces described by Wilson above, thus causing many people to prefer a lower hill, which they have been induced to climb by their early, largely unaware, life's experience, to the higher hills or mountain peaks of which they become aware. In fact, the Church has invested heavily to create the illusion of shark filled moats around its complex of low hills. As many other social theorists have pointed out, this does imply fraud or conscious and malicious planning on the part of Mormon leaders. This is just how human organizations function within a "true belief" or "philosopher king" mindset.

I have written elsewhere about the parallels between modern Mormonism and the mentality (and epistemology) that characterized the Dark Ages (See "Should I Join (or Leave) the Mormon Church? at <http://mccue.cc/bob/postmormon.htm>). Mormonism is still, largely, a Dark Ages oriented religious movement. It rejects most of the principles that made the Renaissance the marvellous thing it was. The only force history has disclosed that restrains the abuse of human power in a reasonable fashion, although far from perfectly, is democracy and the related complex of information transparency and governance devices used in most modern democracies. All non-democratic

organizations that accumulate significant power can be counted on to abuse it. This is a characteristic of such organizations. Those who understand the nature of such organizations and still entrust themselves and their children to it are like those who play with rattle snakes or loaded guns – sooner or later someone will be badly hurt due to the nature of the beast.

I suggest that much of the rugged landscape surrounding the Mormon hills is a mirage created by Mormonism. It is not as hard as it appears to get out, and it feels much better than most can imagine once you are one the way out. Mormonism is designed to use fear, and the mental forces it produces, to maximum effect. This greatly increases the perception of difficulty for anyone who is thinking about leaving, and hence increases the likelihood that people will resign themselves to their “fate” within Mormonism. See the essay titled “Religious Faith ...” under the post Mormon button at <http://mccue.cc/bob/postmormon.htm> for a summary of how fear and cognitive dissonance are harnessed in this regard by Mormonism.

I also suggest that because of the fear employed by Mormonism and its crippling effect on many of us, the role of necessity (or creating our own necessities) is perhaps more important than it first appears. When I was younger I used to enjoy doing back flips off the high diving board, and the Olympic diving towers. I am not a good diver. Front and back flips are the only tricks I could do. And I was most comfortable with the back flip. The first few times I did this trick it was terrifying, and I still remember the two or three times that I missed, and landed on my back. It really hurt. But during my teenage years, I became adept enough at this that it was close to automatic – and so it produced a thrill without any material risk. Then I went on a Mormon mission, got married, had kids quickly, was struggling through university, etc. – I bet that I did not throw a back flip for ten years. I remember being at a Mormon youth activity I was responsible for at about age 30. I looked at those diving towers, and felt like trying a back flip again. But I was afraid. And I remembered how bad it hurt when I missed, and did not feel confident I could turn the trick, particularly on the first try. There were lots of reasons not to be so foolish as to give that a try. But, it would be a lot of fun, and I am an adventuresome person. So, did I climb up the tower to think about it? No, I said to the teen age boys with whom I was the night, “How much do you bet that I can turn a back flip off that tower?” A few seconds later, I had created a psychological necessity that I knew would result in my doing a back flip in the face of the fear I would face as I stood backwards at the front edge of the diving platform.

The psychological process I just described is well known. When we decide consciously or unconsciously that we want to do, or should do, something, we often create situations that are difficult to get out of. We do this individually and as social groups. The public commitment to marital fidelity and the big public wedding are examples of this, as is the Mormon missionary farewell. The reluctance of many post Mormons to “come out” is an example of the same thing in reverse. Once “out” many uncomfortable things are likely to happen.

I regard the coming out step for a post Mormon as much like my inviting my young friends to bet respecting my diving ability, and I believe that I was subconsciously motivated to come out as I did (a three page letter to family and friends) for that purpose. That letter propelled me out into the dangerous looking land that surrounded my low hills. And as a rancher friend has told me, when it comes to eating a steer, "Once you've swallowed the head and the horns, you gotta eat the whole thing." And, I found that the difficulty of the terrain into which I had plunged was nowhere near as bad it had appeared; that there was lots of pleasant company down there, hidden in the gullies and behind bushes, most of whom were similar to me and headed in the same direction; and when I started to climb the slopes of those higher peaks I was far more pleased with the view than I had thought possible. So, even from a short term point of view, I was happy with my decision.

However, as noted earlier, I was not thinking short term when I jumped into the Briar Patch. From a short term point of view, things did not look good to me. I was captive to the forces of fear and cog dis mentioned above. I was motivated to jump by my perception of what was in the best interests of my kids and their kids, in the long term. Imagined myself on the other end of conversations like those I had with my father. I thought of my daughters who are particularly like me in temperament, coming to me at age 45 to say, "Dad, what about all this stuff we just learned about Mormon history? We are disgusted by JS and other Mormon leaders' behavior, and now our marriages are falling apart because our faithful Mormon husbands can't see this stuff though the fog in which they live. Did you know about this?" And I would have to say, "Well, yes I did, but since I did not want to upset you, I thought I should wait for you to figure it out on your own". To which an appropriate response would have been, "What the hell were you thinking?! You stood by and even encouraged us while we built on lives foundations on lies!? You are responsible for much of the pain we are now suffering!! Thanks a lot!!" I did not respond to my father that way, but could think of no reason for which I could object if my daughters had so responded to me.

Cafeteria Mormonism

Many want to pick and choose – to be "cafeteria Mormons". Is this possible? Sure. And for some it will be more possible than others. Some people are better at dealing with complexity, multitasking etc. than others. Consider how the "rugged adaptive landscape" concept noted above is relevant to this point.

Mormonism goes out of its way to make it hard to pick and choose. At conference in April 2003 Gordon Hinckley was still spouting the "all black or white" nonsense, and Jeffrey Holland was scare mongering about how we will "lose" out children if there is the least deviation in terms of our faithfulness (the "Religious Faith ..." essay summarizes my reaction to this). This creates the perception of a more rugged the landscape, and discourages picking and choosing. It discourages people from attempting to move back and forth between different peaks and enjoy many views.

The Church would prefer members who are fully committed. This topic is explained in detail in the essay "Out of My Faith ..." at the web address above, in the section of that

essay dealing with James Fowler's book "Stages of Faith". The Church needs committed members to remain healthy. Cafeteria style members are often a net drain on resources. Fully committed members almost always give more than they take. It helps to think of the Church as an economic or power system. It has income (money, time and other resource from members) and outflows. In the long term, if the incomes do not exceed the outflows, it will die. For obvious reasons, it encourages incomes. So it encourages fully committed members and uses all kinds of scare mongering and other questionable tactics like lying about its history to discourage cafeteria style membership.

Think of this from a child's point of view. This I think nicely illustrates how harsh the Mormon landscape is. If I want my child to pick and choose, I need to teach him to ignore much of what the prophets say. This means contradicting much of what he hears from the nice people at Church. This means explaining why those nice people are wrong, even though they are sincere, wonderful people and sometimes become so emotional that they cry when they tell him that they are right and I am wrong. I need to help him understand the negative vibes he gets when he is around Church people and my name comes up. "Your Dad is a great guy, but ..." And sometimes the negativity is more than vibes – he needs to understand why some people think I am evil, and why that belief on their part is understandable for a host of very complicated reasons the understanding of which eludes some well educated adults of my acquaintance. I basically need to give him a college level understanding of psychology and sociology so he can figure out the well intentioned and completely out of touch with reality people at church and in our family. But he is only 9, and I have lots of time to do that, right?

And I will need to help him to understand those powerful feelings he has when he is around testimony bearing, emotionally charged people of the type just described. I need to help him to understand why the friendships he has with the nice kids at church are conditional upon him continuing to conform, and as he gets older in particular, conditional upon him serving a mission and continuing to believe as they believe. I need to help him not to feel defective when the social system of which he is a part so brands him when he chooses not to conform. He will need at some point to choose between an extensive social network upon which he relies in all kinds of ways that he can't possibly understand, and some abstract concepts.

And finally, what do I do if he falls in love with some sweet young testimony bearing, temple bound thing? How will my complicated, abstract ideas about religion do to when pitted against the forces of love and hormones?

Remind me again why I would want to go down this road? Oh yeah. It is best to not rock the boat any more than is necessary. I suggest that in many cases this is no more than short term thinking, in which we engage because of unwillingness to pay the price necessary to separate ourselves from what has been demonstrated to my satisfaction to be a profoundly negative force in my life.

For an adult faced with the reality of being stuck on a hill, surrounded by brush, and wanting to get to another higher hill, the situation is simpler. You are where you are, and

should learn as much about the costs and benefits in your life as you can before trotting down hill. That is why reading and interacting with other human beings in as broad a fashion as possible is so important. That is how we learn about other peaks, and what is down in the ravines. The Internet has recently opened a world of opportunity in that regard for many people.

I think it is also possible to make this analysis even more individual. Our personal landscape is comprised in large measure by our genetic code. The manner in which we have been acculturated is also important. The Church is not the same in each locale, and some families are more dogmatically connected to it than others. All of this defines the topography of our personal adaptive landscape around the Mormon issue, and will determine realistically, the nature of the other hills that are within our reach.

Conclusion

I still think that bad ideas must be eliminated before good ones can take root and influence us. So, the basic idea of creative destruction still applies. And, as noted above, since we should not (and in most cases cannot successfully in any event) force other adults (or even older children) to do things against their will, we will need to find ways to use the forces of cog dis (as well as anything else that will work and is ethical – I do not advocate philosopher king behavior) to give those we love a reasonable chance to change in the fashion that appears best for them.

I commend the wisdom of taking the process relatively slow so as not to unduly harm important relationships. But remember that those relationships are likely much more robust than we think. Remember that some kinds of cancer are destroyed by bringing the entire human organism near death, and then providing the conditions that are optimal to foster a regeneration of strength. Some forms of religious belief, when combined with some kinds of personality types and condition experiences, are analogous to cancer. This, in my view, is frequently the case with respect to those who are hardcore faithful Mormons as was I.

I should try to become more aware of what aspects of my Mormoness can be destroyed, and which I am stuck with for good or ill. As noted above, I am happy to keep many aspects of Mormonism. The bad ideas that I want to get rid of in my life, and do not want my children to absorb, relate mostly to things like:

- (a) the manner in which Mormon authority dominates Mormon life;
- (b) the manner in which Mormons are taught to react to emotional experience by assuming that certain things (like the CK) are real and that we should do things in this life for the purpose of obtaining things in the next;
- (c) the manner in which Mormons are taught that so many unknowable things are known, and are not to be questioned.

In addition to the forces of cog dis, I should plan for resistance from myself and my loved ones as a result of mourning for the parts of Mormon culture (even if not healthy) that we will miss and cannot (or even should not) replace. For example, after a life time of being told things are certain, it is terrifying to confront the uncertainty of reality. Some get used to this more quickly than others. Some cannot get used to it. A mourning for the certainty of Mormonism results. I know people who drank unhealthy water for years in their youth, and still think they miss its taste.

I should be realistic about the nature of the cultural landscape by which my Mormoness is surrounded. This means both figuring out what is smokescreen or mirage projected by the Mormon Church to confuse me and make me fearfully huddle on my wretched little hill, and what is likely real. These things will determine how far I should attempt to go, and how far I should attempt to encourage those I love to come with me.

Most importantly, I am prepared to "speak with an accent" for the rest of my life in order to give my kids the chance for full cultural fluency of a type other than the Mormon. I have admired those with the courage to sacrifice their pride and position by immigrating to North America from places in which they were respected professionals to wash dishes or drive cab so that their kids could have a better live. I now have the chance to do something of a similar sort.

I am convinced that the time and effort I am spending trying to break free from Mormonism can be better spent by my children breaking new ground far up on the side of some other cultural mountain. I won't try to choose it for them. I will carry them as far through the valleys as I can, let them look at as many mountains as possible, give them a taste of the joy of discovery , and then turn them loose.