

The Metaphor Game and Depression

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Abstract

The metaphor game works as follows: My kids choose a scripture story, or piece of Mormon theology, or part of a popular movie with mythic overtones, and then we see how it might relate to our psyches. We assume that all references to time are to the present, and that each character, aspect of the mythic landscape, etc. is a reference to some part of our psyche.

The Three Degrees of Glory

In the Telestial Kingdom, people are oriented almost exclusively toward themselves, and the here and now. We each identified a place in our psyches that feel like this. Good people who have not finished changing and growing and need to be allowed the room and flexibility to continue this process live in the Terrestrial Kingdom. There is a lack of certainty respecting all things because no one and nothing is perfect, and hence people and events are not predictable. We each identified a place in our psyches that feels like this, and agreed that it is mostly a healthy place. Perfection reigns in the Celestial Kingdom. Hence, no fundamental personal or collective change happens here, but there is lots of progress in the sense that more of the same stuff that exists here is being created. And there is lots of energy; lots of doing. We each identified a place within us that feels like the Celestial Kingdom. This is a place that is both frightening and attractive in some ways. However, the more we talked about it, the more frightening and less attractive it became. This is the place at the end of a tightrope we are told we must walk through life. Change and personal growth are over when we get here. All that remains is lots of doing. My older child said that there is a big place in life that feels lonely like the Telestial Kingdom, and a huge place that feels frenetic, frightening and full of doing and energy, like the Celestial Kingdom, but hardly anything that feels like the Terrestrial Kingdom. As this child said this, there was a look of recognition and learning. This child has struggled with depression, and here was either a cause or a symptom of that difficulty.

Alma the Younger

The character of Alma the Younger relates to our conscious self. The character of his father relates to our unconscious self, which sends messages to the conscious mind. Alma is not in harmony with his environment. Often when we are out of step with reality our subconscious will realize this sooner than our conscious mind will, and will begin to send messages. We call this cognitive dissonance. If cognitive dissonance gets loud enough, it begins to shut down the conscious mind. The subconscious mind, in effect, pulls the conscious mind down into the subconscious. We tend to become depressed or experience other psychological symptoms of stress. While Alma was in his coma, he was reconstructed by the visitation of divine beings. When the subconscious pulls down the conscious into a depressed state, the same kind of reconstructive process is often underway. Divine beings include meds, advice from friends, etc.

The 2,000 Stripling Warriors.

The 2,000 warriors represent our "inner child" or the forces of idealism and faith that well up from time to time in the most hardened and cynical among us. This part of us feels that it can do anything. Helaman represents the part of us that has experience and is more conscious of the reality of things, and what is reasonable to expect and what is not. There is tension between these two forces, with the idealist aspect wanting to charge off and fight this or that risky battle, and the more thoughtful part trying to put the brakes on and use reason. The idealist part of us is not connected to reality; the rationalist part of us is. It is an interesting exercise to think about what these aspects of our character look like, which tends to be dominant and the things in our lives that tend to give one aspect or the other ascendancy.

Galdalf the Grey and the Balrog

This is a classic rebirth story. Gandalf is our conscious self. The Balrog is our deepest, darkest fear. The Balrog is primitive, full of darkness and energy, and emerges from the depths of our soul to occasionally cause great damage. We usually seem to be able to defeat it. But at times in unexpected ways it can drag us down into the bottomless abyss. But even at the bottom of the abyss, there are mountains and towers on mountains. That is, our energy levels while in our lowest states still fluctuate, and the place to fight the Balrog is at the top of one of those fluctuations. This will be our "highest tower on the lowest mountain", where Gandalf fought the Balrog. We are capable of defeating the Balrog. And when we do, we will be stronger for having done so. Or perhaps we have taken some of his negative energy and found ways to harness and redirect it. But in any event, we emerge from the ordeal having been reconstructed by our experience, and better for it. If we are not stronger in a literal sense, we are deeper, more understanding, more human, and we know ourselves much better.

Introduction

One of the games I enjoy playing with my children is the metaphor game. The idea follows the research of Jung and Campbell, along the lines that dreams and religious images are drawn from the same deep psychological font. The current topic is depression. Any of a virtually unlimited number of topics could be chosen.

Humans share a life experience and biological architecture, and hence our internal worlds are similar no matter where or when we live, and this is reflected in common dream and mythic themes. These themes, hence, are maps of our psyches. We can learn a great deal about ourselves by considering our internal world in light of the different characters and characteristics of the various mythic worlds we encounter. And the popularity of any particular mythology can be explained in large measure by the manner in which it touches our psychological buttons. Hence, any mythology that has attracted a significant following and held it for a long time is probably worthy of our attention in this regard. Mormon mythology meets this criterion, regardless of how we feel about the Mormon Church as an institution.

Mythic Reach

It is interesting to think about how various myths appeal to different human groups, or as I put it above, touch our psychological buttons. We can easily think of a variety of types of books, television shows, etc. that were wildly popular for a time, and then faded. They touched our buttons, but derived their primary power from relatively temporary or local social phenomena. Other types of mythology are more long lasting and broad based in their appeal. Some are even called "universal", such as the mythic themes found in the Bible. But if they are universal, why has their appeal been so limited in many parts of the world, such as the East, after centuries of exposure there? And why are the so-called universals within Eastern mythology historically of such limited appeal in the West? And what accounts for the recent surge of popularity in the West of Eastern themes? And why is Christianity not taking off in the East at the same time?

I don't have the answers to these questions, but just considering them is useful. There must be a hierarchy of mythic values in terms of how deep they go into our psyches. Hence some are more enduring and have broader appeal than others. But there are limits as to how most can go, and at different times, different approaches to life have more appeal than others. And now, in particular, in the West the Eastern harmonic approach to life seems to many like the perfect antidote for a frenetic, "doing-oriented", "future-oriented" approach to life. And there is no doubt that in some parts of the world (Africa and Latin America, for example), at least parts of the Protestant-Christian "future-oriented", authoritarian, approach may be of help as peoples attempt to drag themselves out of economic crisis. But I digress.

The Metaphor Game

I played the metaphor game with two of my kids (one older and one pre-adolescent) on a trip this past weekend. The game works as follows: They choose a scripture story, or piece of Mormon theology, or part of a popular movie with mythic overtones, and then we see how it might relate to our psyches. We assume that all references to time are to the present, and that each character, aspect of the mythic landscape, etc. is a reference to some part of our psyche. Here are a few of the more interesting results of this weekend's game. And I of course note that these are only a few of the unlimited number of possible insights that could be drawn from the rich metaphors we discussed.

I should also note that the older child involved in this game is a faithful member of the Mormon Church (the "Church"). The younger is of more liberal religious views, and is outspoken. There was some tension and a few awkward moments between them as our discussion proceeded. Several times I had to tell the younger that I did not want to answer certain questions at that moment because I knew the answers would produce unacceptably high levels of discomfort for the older sibling. I will, however, note that it was a wonderful discussion for all of us in the end. We each learned something important, although the younger child is both young and confident enough to think that none of these ideas are new – they were all so intuitive that that they were immediately accepted as part of the always-known. The older seemed thoughtful respecting some of the insights gained, and I felt that I learned some important things about myself as well.

The younger first suggested Daniel and the Lion's Den for discussion, and was disqualified because we had decided to discuss only things from either the movies or Mormon theology.

The Three Degrees of Glory

The older then suggested "The Three Degrees of Glory":

The literalist lesson here is that if we are obedient during this life, we will have blessings that are so wonderful that we can't comprehend them, and these will come in the afterlife. These blessings relate to things that seem important to us now – being able to continue to associate forever with our families and other loved ones; continuing to have sexual relationships; having tremendous power; etc. The lessons in metaphor are quite different.

The rule of metaphor in this case requires that we relate the terrain of these three kingdoms to that of our psyches. So the question becomes, what is the nature of each kingdom and to which aspects of our psychological world do they relate?

Telestial Kingdom. This place is more wonderful, beautiful etc. than earth. But everyone is alone there. Their behaviour has rendered them unsuitable for the company of others. This is a selfish place. People here are oriented almost exclusively toward themselves, and the here and now. It is hedonistic and present oriented. Not surprisingly, at this extreme of hedonism and present orientation there is much loneliness and suffering. Important relationships have failed. It does not matter how beautiful a place is if we must be there alone when we want company.

We each identified a place in our psyches that feels like this. We have each had times in which we felt that relationships were not working and we were alone, even in beautiful places. We don't like this. Being alone is not bad per se, but wanting relationships you can't have is miserable.

Terrestrial Kingdom. This place is more wonderful than we can imagine. Good people live here. They are relatively laid back. There is lots of hanging out and enjoying things. People are sometimes alone, but because of comfortable choice. Relationships work, but are not committed in the way they are in the Celestial Kingdom. This has both positive and negative aspects. On the negative side, the kinds of "community" of which Scott Peck writes (See "A Different Drum" – communities based on a high level of long term commitment) may not exist here in the same way as they could in a place where commitments are stronger. On the other hand, people are permitted to change and grow here, and are also permitted to change the nature of the fundamental relationships in which they participate, which makes sense in light of their continuing need to change themselves. We acknowledged that as people grow in different directions there will be times when it is important to allow relationships to change – or even be dissolved – so that individual change can continue along healthy lines.

In short, this is a place where people have not finished changing and growing and need to be allowed the room and flexibility to continue this process. The cement is still wet and being moulded, so to speak. And within that healthy, growing process it is possible to have highly committed relationships that are accepted or are even based on change, and commitment to each other within that context. These relationships can go as far as

anything Peck has described for earthly humans, but the mythic ideal of the Celestial Kingdom is unattainable. There is a lack of certainty respecting all things because they are not perfect, and hence not predictable. In particular, it will always be possible that what we have today in terms of relationship might not endure. Hence, what we have should not be taken for granted, but rather worked at to preserve and improve.

We each identified a place in our psyches that feels like this, and agreed that it is mostly a healthy place.

Celestial Kingdom. This place is the opposite of the Telestial Kingdom in many ways. Everything is about order, power and commitment to relationships here. The only uncertainty relates to loved ones who have not made it here. There is a tremendous amount of energy and lots being done. Worlds are being created, managed etc. The dominant force is love, but of a narrow type with regard to what is in the Celestial Kingdom. Everything operates on the same wavelength. Anything that was not on this wavelength would be "burned up" by the tremendous amount of energy that is here. Hence, the only things that are permitted to exist are those that "fit in", and all these are loved. Of course, things that are not in the Celestial Kingdom (like spirit children who have been created and are being "tried" on some earth or loved ones who are in lower kingdoms) are loved and are not of Celestial Kingdom material, but those things are distant. It is easier to act and feel lovingly toward people who are distant and different than people who are really close to you, and reject your most important values. This explains a lot in terms of the LDS propensity to put those who will not conform away from them formally through excommunication and subtly through a withdrawal of trust and respect. If someone won't conform, they are less than those who do conform, cannot be trusted, are suspect in a million ways, and hence to the extent they are loved (but mostly grieved for and pitied – strong emotions of all kinds, including hate, are often hard to distinguish from love), this generally speaking happens at a safe emotional distance.

No fundamental personal or collective change happens here, but there is lots of progress in the sense that more of the same stuff that exists here is being created. In that sense, it is a religious leader's dream, and we note that it is not a coincidence that a religious leader did dream this up, well into the project of being a religious leader. All rules are obeyed with exactness, and everyone is busily working and building psychological replicas of their leader. This reminds me of the computer program "Smith" and his crew (an interesting coincidence in the choice of name and missionary-like appearance of these characters) in the third movie of the Matrix trilogy. It is worthwhile to consider the possibility that any attempt to impose sameness and universal conformity may lead toward the condition of humankind just before Smith's apparent "triumph" and immediate destruction at The Matrix's conclusion.

Relationship commitments in the Celestial Kingdom can be forever, because fundamental change is no longer necessary after perfection is reached. Neither individual nor group change is a part of the landscape. Perfection cannot be changed. There is lots of interesting Mormon theological argument along these lines with regard to whether god continues to progress. The conservative view is no – he is perfect and can hence neither change nor progress in anyway. The more "liberal" view seems to be that he only progresses in the sense that what he has created continues to grow. But as a perfect being he no longer changes. All beings in the highest order of the Celestial Kingdom are of this type.

Unlike many conceptions of religious heavens that are of the "hang out and just be" order (lots of floating around on clouds; lots of signing and harp playing; lots of contemplation), the Celestial Kingdom is a place of doing and accomplishment. It is very future oriented in that sense – what is being done today is primarily focused on what it will accomplish for some future time. That is, worlds are being created and populated and governed, etc. It is a place for builders as opposed to philosophers. In this Mormonism differs from most Protestant sects. The other Protestants mostly posit a future oriented earthly life and a life hereafter of present oriented, abstract existence or contemplation. Joseph Smith said, in effect, "That makes no sense. We will continue doing, building, achieving and being future oriented throughout the eternities. That is good here; it is what we need here; and life after death must therefore be more of the same". Mormonism was conceived as an eminently practical, sensible religion. It is a meat and potatoes religion, and continues to this day to have a radically underdeveloped theology as a result of its departure point in this regard which is perhaps a good thing since the development of a robust theology evidences a monumental waste of brainpower. And the Mormon "practical", literalist approach missed the point that many other religions try to make by their emphasis on the unknowability of god and the conditions of the afterlife that left them with an abstract picture of both. The point is that there are many things beyond human comprehension, and these are often described in mythology and theology (its derivative) by way of contradiction (not understandable) and abstraction (interpretable in many ways). Mormonism endeavoured to provide understandable, literal, comforting answers to all of life's most difficult questions, and hence steered a different course.

In any event, while discussing the Celestial Kingdom with my kids we each identified a place within us that feels like the Celestial Kingdom. As we talked, we agreed that this is a place that is both frightening and attractive in some ways. However, the more we talked about it, the more frightening and less attractive it became. This is the place at the end of a tightrope we are told we must walk through life. Change and personal growth are over when we get here. All that remains is lots of doing. Kind of like an artist who masters a particular style, and then forever creates just that that style of painting, or books that are driven by the same formula – a Harlequin Romance world. Kind of like ... being an active member of the Mormon Church (I did not share this thought with my girls) because there our roles are largely prescribed and all that remains to do is show up, and execute, and whatever you do, do not color outside the lines.

In the end, the Celestial Kingdom is characterized by a huge amount of energy and doing, and almost everything is oriented toward what we can accomplish in the future.

The Celestial Kingdom mentality makes a lot of sense when we think about the milieu out of which the concept emerged. It is well known that societies in which resources are abundant (like ours) tend to be more present oriented – more oriented toward enjoying the moment as it passes instead of working to create future benefits. This is one of the reasons that the present young generation is looked down upon by their more workaholic parents and grandparents. The younger generation was not raised with the same "scarcity" mentality and is not prepared to sacrifice as much of the present for things in the future. They do not need to do this, and hence won't. On the other hand, the more scarcity oriented and harsh the environment, the more prevalent tends to be a "future oriented" mentality that says, "I must work hard today in order to prepare for the future". The environments that gave rise to both the Hebrews and their Old Testament,

as well as Joseph Smith, Brigham Young and early Mormonism, were scarcity environments. This is the same environment that produced the Protestant work ethic, and the Celestial Kingdom is an ideal environment in that regard. Hence, it is not surprising that the Celestial Kingdom was conceived of as the Mormon heaven – lots of energy and efficiency; lots being accomplished; community harmony derived from everyone being committed to the same goals of creating more of what the community needs to create in order to sustain itself; obedience to law being of paramount importance because community solidarity and cooperation is more important in times of scarcity; etc. This is precisely what was required in order to first survive and then prosper as a group in that time. And it is not surprising that many recognized this as a useful basic life paradigm for their lives in that time, and hence accepted it as "true". It is a short hop from there to "eternally true", and this is a hop that humans habitually make - true or useful now means god ordained and true for all time. From a societal point of view, this attitude is often useful because it is used to persuade people that they should do what is best for the group. You get better buy in for a useful idea if in addition to being useful, people believe that god told them to do it or suffer some terrible penalty.

There were also a few other things that occurred to me as I wrote the above that I did not talk about with my kids. One of them was another distinguishing feature between the Celestial Kingdom and Terrestrial Kingdoms. There is a difference between the commitment of a woman to a man through eternal marriage, as opposed to a man to a woman. A woman is committed to a man – end of story. A man is not committed to a woman in the same way because since presumably there will be a continual supply or unattached women in light of the greater female tendency toward obedience within Mormonism. Therefore, a man will be able (or perhaps will be required) under the laws of the Celestial Kingdom to take additional wives. This gives the man lots of choice in terms of which woman within his group of wives he associates with etc. But now I am getting into the non-productive (from my point of view) part of the exercise. When we start of talk about what the Celestial Kingdom will literally be like, we are assuming that it is a real place and the discussion almost immediately degenerates into a "angels dancing on the head of a pin" kind of thing that often goes on the High Priest Groups; here little of use can be learned. There is, however, much to be learned as we talk about the different parts of our psyches that resemble or feel to us like the three states described above.

The Three Degrees of Glory in the Psyche

As we talked, my older child said that there is a big place that feels lonely like the Celestial Kingdom, and a huge place that feels frenetic, frightening and full of doing and energy, like the Celestial Kingdom, but hardly anything that feels like the Terrestrial Kingdom. As this child said this, there was a look of recognition and learning. This child has struggled with depression, and here was a clear cause or symptom, I am not sure which, for those feelings. This child is a type A character, and has been living a future oriented tightrope walk without recognizing it. Tight rope walks are lonely, and risky. Type A characters take most things seriously enough that they set themselves apart from those who are more casual in how they do things. More loneliness. And this child's ideal has been the Celestial Kingdom and the tremendous energy, efficiency, achievement, harmony and lack of fundamental change that exists there. When we try to live this way, since it is virtually impossible to do in this life, we experience continual frustration and feelings of failure, and hence more loneliness in the midst of a group of numb, smiling folk at church who assure all who will listen that they are on the edge of

the Celestial Kingdom right now. The recognition of these three worlds inside of us, and their relative merits and the space they occupy within us, was an insight of fundamental importance for my child. It was useful for me to work through this exercise from my point of view as well.

Alma the Younger

The older child next suggested "Alma the Younger":

Basic story: Alma was the son of a prophet. He became disobedient and fought against the Church. His father exercised faith through prayer over a significant period of time and eventually due to his father's faith, Alma was overcome by the spirit, went into a coma for a period of time. While in that state he had some moving spiritual experiences and emerged a changed person who was righteous and obedient to god. He became a prophet.

The literalist lesson is that if we pray and exercise faith god, will override the agency of other human beings. My father often spoke to me of this while I have struggled with rebellious teenagers, and has told me how he used this very principle to straighten me out when I was a rebellious teen. Until recently, I suppose that he thought it had worked a permanent change in my character. I have always assured him that I did not think god in any event would override the agency of another human being. While I learned a lot from the Celestial Kingdom analysis above, I learned even more from this one, since this story has always puzzled me.

The character of Alma the Younger relates to our conscious self. The character of his father relates to our unconscious self, which sends messages to the conscious mind. Alma is not in harmony with his environment. He is fighting or in strife with some fundamentally important aspect of the reality by which he is surrounded. The literalist would assume that the problem is always disobedience to god. The metaphoric lesson is much broader. Often when we are out of step with reality our subconscious will realize this sooner than our conscious mind will, and will begin to send messages. We sometimes call this cognitive dissonance. If cognitive dissonance gets loud enough, it begins to shut down the conscious mind. The subconscious mind, in effect, pulls the conscious mind down into the subconscious. Alma went into a coma and had his visions. We tend to become depressed or experience other psychological symptoms of stress. We lose our energy. We sleep a lot. Etc.

While Alma was in his coma, he was reconstructed by the visitation of divine beings. When the subconscious pulls down the conscious into a depressed state, the same kind of reconstructive process is often underway. We are being told that something in our lives is not working, and we are searching for a way to make things work. While depressed, we are humble. We will consider sources of information and advice to which we are usually immune. These include advice from loved ones, counsellors, professional advisors (it takes more humility than most of us have to consult a professional); books; Internet and other discussion groups; etc. Such are our divinities.

While in our depressed state we don't always find a way out. And some of us need medication to help with structural or biological problems. But the process is still the same. The various medications, biofeedback methods, talk therapies etc. now available are simply additional forms of divine intervention within the Alma the Younger metaphor.

In the not too distant past, the only remedies available were the psychosomatic effects and well-intentioned advice that came through priesthood blessings and other encouragement received from friends and family members. We should all feel grateful that we live in a time that provides so many more "divine" tools for our use. But even with those, a way out cannot always be found. But the process of searching for that way has likely been the same for millennia. And if we are fortunate enough to emerge from our depressed state, we do so with the humility it has induced and willingness to consider new ways to do things that it creates, and finally with a new plan as to how to make things work. And we may go through this process many times as we and our circumstances change.

I have been close to clinically depressed (or perhaps clinically depressed – I did not see a psychiatrist) twice in my life. The first time was as a teenager while I was fighting my parents and the Church's demands. I slept 12 hours a night and was still always tired. I went to doctors to see what was the matter with me and had all kind of medical tests. The depression cleared up when I finally buckled to the Church's demands and decided to be a 100% obedient Mormon. I accepted the literalist interpretation of the Alma story, in effect. The next depression episode was in my late 30s and early 40s as I found that I could no longer stay on the Church's obedience treadmill, and that it was producing problems for my children. The depressed or low energy state lasted years in this later case. I emerged from it when I realized that I did not have to obey because the Church is not what it has represented itself to be.

The 2,000 Stripling Warriors

The next story my older child suggested was "Helaman's 2,000 Stripling Warriors"

Basic story: Helaman is put in charge of 2,000 teenagers as an army unit. Their mothers have promised them that they will come through battle unharmed. They believe their mothers and are prepared to do anything asked of them. Helaman is a battle hardened veteran, and while he has a lot of faith he does not wish to be foolish and tries to be careful as to what he allows his young charges to do. They are fighting in a large war against the Lamanites, and are a small part of the Nephite army. Helaman employs a strategy of running way from the part of the Lamanite army they are fighting to tire them out, and then turning back to fight at the place of Helaman's choosing. Another band of Nephite soldiers is also involved, and part of the drama in the story is not knowing when or whether this other band of soldiers will be able to help, or if that other band needs help.

The literalist message in this story is that god performs miracles, particularly when the faith of mothers is exercised on behalf of their sons, and we should do what we are told and if we do things will work out well for us even in our darkest hours.

One look at the metaphors involved is as follows: The 2,000 warriors represent our "inner child" or the forces of idealism and faith that well up from time to time in the most hardened and cynical among us. This part of us feels that it can do anything. Helaman represents the part of us that has experience and is more conscious of the reality of things, and what is reasonable to expect and what is not. There is tension between these two forces, with the idealist aspect wanting to charge off and fight this or that risky battle, and the more thoughtful part trying to put the brakes on and use reason. The idealist part of us is not connected to reality; the rationalist part of us is. It is an

interesting exercise to think about what these aspects of our character look like, which tends to be dominant and the things in our lives that tend to give one aspect or the other ascendancy.

The Lamanite army represents the many things we struggle against from time to time – our goals, difficulties, ego, etc. And the other Nephite army represents hidden emotional or psychological reserves that are there for us to draw upon. We don't know where they are, when they will arrive, or what they will be able to do. But we know they are there and that sometimes we will benefit from their help. We also know that they cannot always be counted on to bail us out.

Galdalf the Grey and the Balrog

I suggested that some movies also contain great mythologies and mentioned the Lord of the Rings and the Matrix as recent examples. The older child indicated that the Lord of the Rings had nothing to offer in that regard, and so I suggest that we discuss Galdalf fighting the Balrog.

Basic story: Gandalf the Grey and his band are hiking through the dwarfs' underground domain. They were forced to go this route. The dangers lurking in this dark, deep way had made them reluctant to take it. At one point they are fighting a horde of monsters, when the sound of something much worse sends their enemies scurrying to for cover. Galdalf and Co. try to escape. The Balrog catches up to them as they try to cross a narrow stone bridge. He is described as an ancient, primitive monster. He is huge, powerful, full of darkness and fire, and relatively undefined. Gandolf's powers are sufficient to hold him back, and then seem to defeat him. The Balrog is knocked off the stone bridge and falls into the abyss. At the last moment, however, the tip of his tail whips up from the deep, catches Gandalf's leg and pulls him down into the abyss as well. They fall and fight on the way down. Eventually, they land on "the highest tower of the lowest mountain" and there have their epic battle. Gandalf is close to death many times, but eventually defeats the Balrog and kills him. As a result, Gandalf emerges into the "real" world again as Gandalf the White, with powers much greater than those he had before.

This is a classic rebirth story. Gandalf is our conscious self. The Balrog is our deepest, darkest fear. For those who have been abused, it may be the source of abuse or the dark places caused by that abuse. Since the Church and other authority figures have cause my most painful experiences, I conceive of the Balrog in terms of a religious authority figure who restricts my world and scares the hell out of me. The Balrog is primitive, full of darkness and energy, and emerges from the depths of our soul to occasionally cause great damage. We often seem to be able to defeat it. But at times in unexpected ways it can drag us down into the seeming bottomless abyss. But even at the bottom of the abyss, there are mountains and towers on mountains. That is, our energy levels while in our lowest states still fluctuate, and the place to fight the Balrog is at the top of one of those fluctuations. This will be our "highest tower on the lowest mountain". We are capable of defeating the Balrog. And when we do, we will be stronger for having done so. Or perhaps we have taken some of his negative energy and found ways to harness and redirect it. But in any event, we emerge from the ordeal having been reconstructed by our experience, and better for it. If we are not stronger in a literal sense, we are deeper, more understanding, more human, and we know ourselves much better.

Conclusion

I have played this game numerous times with my kids. Most of the time it is pretty light hearted. This time there was more at stake because of my older child's recent difficulties with depression. This is a subject in which this child is now vitally interested, and so has "ears to hear", and as a result the conversation we had was of significant importance. The other time a conversation of this type was of significant importance came with another older child, on another long car trip, during which concerns of a completely different sort were in issue. As I think about those two trips, I am amazed as how the Book of Mormon stories and Mormon theological concepts the kids chose for analysis lent themselves to metaphoric interpretation that ran long precisely the lines respecting which they needed to think. My explanation for this is two fold. First, perhaps their subconscious gave them some help in choosing the stories, even though they thought that their choices were random. And second, the Mormon theology is well equipped from a metaphoric point of view. B.H. Roberts said that the Book of Mormon was not believable, has thinly developed characters and plot lines, and was not likely for that reason to be real history. I agree with him. But all he said can be true while permitting the book to house powerful, useful metaphoric themes as Leonard Arrington (another LDS scholar who has earned my respect in many ways) believed it did.

My final observation is that while I can find lots of interesting things to think about in scripture (Mormon and other) based metaphors, I find things that there are for me much more fulfilling in good literature and even pop culture. The Matrix, for example, is the source of some of the most compelling and contemporarily relevant metaphor I have ever found. The Lord of the Rings is awfully good as well. So while I do not give the LDS scriptures a special place in this regard, I will give them what I think is their due.