

Mormon History in a Nutshell

And How To Deal With It: A Message For My Children

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August 26, 2004
Version 4

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

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Everyone falsifies history even if it is only his own personal history. Sometimes the falsification is deliberate, sometimes unconscious; but always the past is altered to suit the needs of the present. The best we can say of any account is not that it is the real truth at last, but that this is how the story appears now. Joseph Freeman

Introduction

I am not an historian, but have come to have great respect for those who research, and write, solid history. After having read more Mormon history during the past couple of years than I could ever have imagined I would, I have decided to condense my understanding of the important facts into a bite sized document before "closing the book", as it were, on that aspect of my study respecting Mormonism. So here it is.

I write in the spirit of Chaim Potok's "Wanderings" which is essentially a history of Western civilization from a Jewish point of view, or Charles Dickens' "The Life of Our Lord: Written for His Children During the Years 1846 to 1849", but with a little additional attitude. That is, I will summarize the trends of Mormon history that are in my view most important, and incidentally those that are not likely to be mentioned to my children by loving family and community members who are faithful Mormons. Such a summary will necessarily gloss over many things, and distort others. But, I have done my best to produce something teenagers as well as older people will be able to understand, and that is as accurate as I can make it in terms of the trends it portrays. I am certain that many will disagree with my point of view, and am not troubled by that.

The primary purpose of this essay is to encourage my children, and anyone else who happens to read it, to ask questions; to expand their perspective with regard to their Mormon heritage; and most importantly, not to simply accept what they are told by their well-intentioned, but largely misinformed, Mormon friends, relatives and community leaders.

My apologies to real historians, like Mike Quinn, Todd Compton and Maureen Beecher, for whom I have the utmost regard and to whom I am indebted.

The Nature of History, Probabilities, Cognitive Dissonance and Fear

All who write history (including me) are stuck in the spot Joseph Freeman describes above. But that having been said, I also recognize and commend to you the wisdom of Aristotle, who said: "If you would understand anything, observe its beginning and its development." The fact that this is not easy to do does not diminish its importance.

As I have done many times in the past, I caution you not to take my word, or anyone else's, without following it up with your own careful investigation. One of the main differences between education and brainwashing is that education expands perspective, and hence choice, and hence individual autonomy. Brainwashing does the opposite. It narrows perspective, reduces

choice, and makes the individual easier to control. Those who attempt to brainwash us in various ways generally do not encourage us to consider points of view that conflict with their own, and attempt to control the information we see. Educators do not do this, or at least do not consciously do it. And they encourage questioning as well as the use of all available and relevant sources of information.

I warn you in particular against those who will undoubtedly tell you that we can't be sure of anything, so we should simply accept the Mormon Church's version of its history because so many other good people, including many we love, have accepted it and the Mormon system "works" for them. Almost all of the people who say this, some of whom are very intelligent, do not apply the same rule to the other aspects of their lives. They make most of their important decisions on the basis of evidence and probabilities, but largely ignore these when it comes to the historical and current facts that underpin their religious beliefs. In this they are no different from other well-intentioned, well educated people in other faiths who continue to believe against the odds that the Earth is around 6,000 years old, that somehow in the big picture not having blood transfusions is more important than staying alive, that the Holocaust did not occur, etc. The odd behaviour of Mormons in this regard is just one example of a type of odd behaviour that is surprisingly common.

My major achievement during the past couple of years is finally getting to a point of intellectual maturity where I am able to assess the evidence and the probabilities as to what happened as Mormonism commenced and developed much as I do regarding decisions I make as I practice my profession and in other aspects of my daily life.

Nothing in life is certain, with the exception of things like mathematics that are of our own creation and hence under our control. But that does not stop us from making important decisions, and should not prevent us from questioning our religious traditions based on the best information we can gather. To fail to do so is to surrender a very important part of our individuality to those who make the rules that govern Mormonism. People who have spent most of their lives within Mormonism are generally not aware of how much they have given up in this regard because they either have never experienced anything different, or have forgotten what that is like.

It is my view that the many intelligent people who are unwilling to question their Mormon beliefs and cultural traditions are held captive by the forces of cognitive dissonance and fear. That is, they have so much to lose in terms of relationships, community status etc. that their subconscious minds prevent them from seeing evidence that is clear to others. People like this have been carefully studied by social scientists, and the similarities between the behaviour of faithful Mormons and many other groups of people who are under the influence of cognitive dissonance are extensive. For example, faithful Mormon behaviour is similar to that of the woman whose husband is cheating on her. She is often the last one to be able to see the evidence of his unfaithfulness that all her friends can see, and she even resists what they tell her (for a while at least) when they attempt to help her "wake up". Her behavior is largely driven by her belief that she has so much to lose if her marriage fails. While under the influence of fear of this nature, we tend not to make decisions on a rational basis, and it has been proven that we cannot see evidence that is plainly visible to others who are not subject to such influences. I see this as a significant problem in the Mormon community.

The more I learn about how my mind works the more clear it is to me that religion is one of the hard to pin down but very important things that bind human groups together. The psychologists tell us that the more important something is, and the more difficult it is to find information about it that is clearly right or wrong, the more likely it is that we will end up feeling comfortable with the opinion that is held by the majority of people with whom we have the closest relationships. The

same is true of politics, environmental issues, issues related to abortion or gay rights or gay marriage, etc. Religion is just another one of these issues. Hence, people tend to go with the dominant force in their group on these questions, and tend to think that they are being "rational" when they do so. That is just how humans behave, and I see nothing unusual about Mormon behaviour in this regard.

My 18 year-old daughter Marin used an analogy during a recent conversation I had with her. She said it seems like Mormons and many others are in different boxes made of one-way mirrors. Others can see in, and understand more or less what is going on in our box as well as all the other boxes, but we can't see out and are (as most people are) relatively unaware of our own actions, and so have no idea how foolish we sometimes look relative to what is going on around us.

My extension to Marin's analogy is as follows. Anyone who can't get outside of their own box and learn to look back into it will be stuck there under the control of those who made or maintain the box. If the box is a relatively healthy place, that may be fine. If it is not, this could be a terrible thing. And it is unlikely that any of us can know if our box is a healthy place or not until they learn to get outside and look back in. Think of the people who committed mass suicide because their religious leaders told them to do so. We have solid evidence that shows many of them were thrilled with their box. Think of the Taliban, the Old Order Amish, the Hutterites and many other groups who severely restrict what their members can do. From what I have read, most of their members are as happy, and sometimes even more so, than other members of our society. Humans are flexible creatures who can adapt to amazingly harsh environments, particularly if they are not aware of alternatives.

I also note that the one-way-mirror boxes Marin described likely vary in terms of how they restrict outward vision. The Mormon mirrors restrict quite a bit, but other even more cult-like groups restrict virtually all outward vision. And some groups restrict outward vision much less so than do the Mormons. And finally, there a few groups who recognize that most human beings have trouble with this issue to one extent or another and go out of their way to try to help people see out of their own boxes. These groups, in my view, are the healthiest.

So, the trick is to get outside our own box; to see ourselves more as others see us. The easiest way to do that is to read and take seriously what others who are respected and taken seriously by most of society have to say about us. Mormons are, of course, told by their leaders not to do that.

More Fear, and Perspective Expansion

Much of the Mormon belief system is based on fear – and primarily fear that if a person is not obedient to Mormon authority, her life will fall apart here and now, and she will lose the opportunity to live after death with her family in a wonderful place that Mormons call the "Celestial Kingdom". These beliefs are pounded deep into faithful Mormons, and produce a huge amount of fear in them. Most of this is subconscious. That is, Mormons will say that they are not afraid of anything. That is just like, as noted below, the way that the Nepalese and Nigerians will tell you that they are happy while living in terrible conditions. Until you have experienced an alternative, it is impossible to understand your present experience. I could only see the role fear played in my life after I shed my Mormon beliefs.

Humans throughout history have inclined toward the leadership of those who promise to solve their problems for them, or offer formulaic guarantees as to how those problems will be solved. Mormons are simply one of innumerable groups who behave in this way, and prey upon this

innate human tendency. Mormons are trained to depend upon authority, and to believe that they should not, and are not capable of, making many decisions on their own. This creates a form of fear, and Mormon behaviour in this regard reminds me a little of The Truman Show in which Jim Carey was conditioned as a little boy to fear crossing a certain bridge that stood between him and knowledge of the outside world. The fear with which Mormons live (unconsciously for the most part) creates real barriers, but when we finally push through them we find a world that is not at all like the one we were taught to fear.

This is an important point. If you ask a Mormon if he is afraid of something (anti-Mormon information for example) he will likely say that he is not afraid of it, but rather feels that it is worthless, wrong, not worth his time, etc. The same sort of thing can be said of many Mormons' attitude respecting gay people, or gay marriage. Faithful Mormons are not likely to identify their feelings in this regard as fear, but rather as revulsion or a strong belief that a certain belief or behaviour is wrong, etc. In most cases we are dealing with here a subtle kind of fear that manifests itself to the individual feeling it in a socially acceptable way. We like to feel in control of ourselves. Fear makes us feel out of control. So, to the extent possible, we recast fear as other things that seem to us as our choices, or our reaction to something that just "is".

For example, today at lunch a nice Mormon lady of my acquaintance was on the fringe of a discussion related to gay rights, and said with horror in her voice upon hearing some things I said about our need to recognize the legitimacy of a gay lifestyle for many people, "But that is just wrong and it always will be!" When I drew a parallel between current Mormon attitudes respecting gays and past Mormon attitudes respecting blacks she looked ill, because I am fairly certain she had no idea what Mormon beliefs (particularly those of Brigham Young and those who believed he was God's prophet) were regarding black people. My point was that attitudes that seem permanent do change, and our generally poor understanding of our own history makes us far more inclined than is healthy to accept our current understanding of many things based on "prophetic authority" as being carved in stone. This is one of the reasons for which an understanding of Mormon history is important. It makes clear, first and foremost, how wrong Mormon prophets have been across a wide range of issues. Current Mormon leaders do their best to prevent information of this nature from circulating since it will have the effect of making people less obedient to what current Mormon leaders have to say.

To illustrate this point, I note that blacks were long regarded by many Mormons as a subhuman species. Brigham Young famously counselled death "on the spot" (that is, without trial or other protections afforded by legal process) for black men who had sex with white women, for example. Some vigilante murders of black men in Utah were likely encouraged by this kind of bigoted, prophetic nonsense. Mormon apostles such as Mark Peterson and Bruce McConkie made outrageous statements as recently as the 1960s against mixed race marriages, indicating that Mormons attitudes were still light years behind most of the rest of the democratic world up to that time.

The combination of religious leaders who think that they have special access to wisdom and followers who believe them, produces bigoted, fearful attitudes in some people like the nice, well-intentioned woman I just mentioned. I doubt she would be inclined to consider any information that would question her beliefs respecting the sinful nature of the gay lifestyle because that would cause her to perhaps question the authority of her religious leaders. If they are wrong about something this important, what else might they be wrong about? And if they are just plain "wrong", that would cause an entire world to collapse and her entire life's work to become of questionable worth. Few have the courage (or feel sufficient need) to stare that possibility in the eye. As one who has, let me bear my testimony that the fear was paralyzing once I forced it out of my subconscious and attempted to deal with it. I was physically ill for weeks as I wrestled with it. It is only my stubborn nature that kept me at this until finally my

perspective expanded enough that the fear began to fade, and as my vision cleared of its influence wonderful sights slowly came into view.

The more information we have and the broader our perspective is, the less we are likely to fear. I hope you will work throughout your lives to expand your perspective, and that you will fear as few things as possible and live as little of your lives as possible under the influence of fear.

"But Think About What You Stand to Lose!"

"Your wife might leave you! You won't be able to go to the Temple with your kids when they get married! And if you are wrong and Mormonism really is true, you will not be with your family in the Celestial Kingdom! You can't be sure you are right, so why would you risk any of these things!?"

I heard this kind of thing many times while I was deciding whether to leave Mormonism or not. It is simply more of the fear-based approach to life used by Mormon leaders in the attempt to keep the faithful marching in line. There are a lot of problems, in my view, with living life on the basis this approach suggests.

For example, should I not explore questions that seem legitimate to me? If I explore them, and find that my religious leaders seem not to be trustworthy, why should I continue to trust and obey them? If I act like I continue to trust and obey them when in fact I do not, is this not deceitful? Would I not be living a lie? Would I not be deceiving my children in particular and encouraging them to do things that I have decided are unwise? That would surely be worse than almost anything else. So, is my only safe course of action to never question my religious leaders? Surely that is not the kind of life we want. Even the statements of many Mormon leaders indicate that is not the kind of life we should pursue.

The fear-based approach also encourages short-term thinking. It may be painful, difficult etc. for me to leave Mormonism, but what about my children, their children etc. How do my actions affect the pain they will likely suffer and the joys they may have the chance to experience? It is always easier to understand these issues when we frame them in the experience of other people. So, think about a 45 year old man who is a Hutterite or Mormon polygamist. How much pain will he suffer as he leaves his community, starts over in the outside world, and tries to learn how to live in our contemporary, eclectic, pluralistic world? He will likely never quite "get it" because of the conditioning to which he has been subjected, and so will always be a kind of fish out of water. This will exact a high price from him throughout his life. But what of his children, grandchildren, great grandchildren? What will his sacrifice likely do for them? To bring this into focus, compare the life they are likely to have on the "outside" with what they would have been subjected to on the "inside". That is how I frame my experience, although the adjustment and sacrifice in my case is nowhere near as extreme as it would be for the two examples I gave.

So, this approach in a variety of ways interferes with the formation of a broad perspective. It says, in effect, if information makes you uncomfortable with your Mormon life, avoid it, suppress it, etc." A better approach would be to say, as I do:

I love you and don't purport to know what will be best for you, and so I encourage you to gain the broadest perspective possible, to understand that learning is often painful, and to be prepared to change your ideas of what is right and wrong, and what will likely be best for you, numerous times as you pass through life. If Mormonism (which I do not think works for me) ends up working in whole or part for you, wonderful, as long as you use it instead of allowing it to use you. And in any event, I look forward to learning from

you (even if it causes me pain) as your perspective broadens and your life takes you in the direction that you think works best for you.

The Mormon "End Game" – What They Are Doing Whether They Know It Or Not

This is perhaps the most important piece of perspective my children can have when considering the differences between the story of Mormon history as told by the Mormon Church, and the story others tell.

The purpose of all of the fun activities you will attend in the Mormon community is to turn you into a fully faithful, obedient Mormon. Mormon leaders are upfront about this. In a leadership training seminar I attended while I served as Bishop Boyd Packer, an Apostle, told us (by way of video conference) that the purpose of each and every Mormon activity or meeting from Cub Scouts through High Priest meetings was to encourage people to make and keep "covenants". That is, to get baptized, go to the Mormon temple etc. and then to keep the promises made there. And the main promise made in the Mormon temple is to give everything in terms of your time, money, talent etc. to the Mormon Church for which the Mormon Church asks. Everything the Mormon Church and its members do is consciously or unconsciously designed with that purpose in mind.

So, Mormonism goes out of its way to put on a friendly, attractive face. One thing Mormon leaders have become adept at is marketing. To the extent possible, the activities sponsored by the Mormon Church are fun, and this is particularly true of those aimed at children and teenagers. Those on the fringes of the Church like non-members who attend some Mormon meetings, inactive Mormons, or the children of people like me who disbelieve the Church's claims, are often subjected to "love bombing". This is part of Mormonism's "milk before meat" policy. The fun stuff and information that says that everything is simple and wonderful comes first. The hard work (like finding out about many of the things Mormon leaders have done to people over the years, serving a mission and spending huge amounts of time away from your family to do things like be the Bishop) comes later, once your life is built around Mormon relationships and you have agreed to do everything that Mormon leaders tell you to do, and believe that if you don't do that, you will not be able to live with your family after death in the "Celestial Kingdom" (the highest part of heaven). This is where the fear and cognitive dissonance I described above comes in again. And, this leaves you little choice as to whether to do the hard work. The troubling, realistic information only comes out when you start to ask questions, which you are told not to do, and so often do not do.

The study of cult behaviour is largely about how mental walls are created to keep information out and allow the cult members to be happy with a situation that would repulse most people on the outside. One of the many fascinating things about cults is how, step by step, a person who would be repulsed by something while on the outside of a group can be brought inside and come to not only accept it, but be happy with it and try to sell it to others. This is why "milk before meat", which in other circumstances is a sound pedagogical principle, is so important in the cult environment, and so abused. For educational purpose, "milk before meat" means that a building block process should be used to allow the eventual understanding of complex concepts that could not be understood at the beginning of the process. In the cult environment, milk before meat often means that novices must be misled to get them in and committed to the cult before the real story can be told. Given the nature of the story the Mormon Church tells about its origins and history and what real historians have to say on the same topic, it seems clear that Mormonism is cult-like in this regard, although in my view it is a "soft" cult – that is, something like a 6 or 7 on a scale of ten in a world where there are lots of 9s and tens.

It is well documented that the people who leave cults go through a process that involves a lot of stress and unhappiness as they reacquaint (or acquaint) themselves with the world around them and how it works. This is particularly painful for Mormons and others like them who are required by their dominant social structure to breach the group conformity that is much more important to their religious faith than it is to most. This causes ruptures in relationships of many kinds. That is the "seamy underside" of the Mormon emphasis on family and community solidarity, the frequent expression of love, etc. While usually not intended to be so, it is in fact highly conditional. Its effect is to make it difficult for people to withdraw from the Mormon community.

All human beings enjoy having attention paid to them and being told how great they are. This is a well-known technique that is used to attract people into religious and other groups of all kinds, some good and others very bad. The well-intentioned, loving members of the Mormon Church use these techniques too, because they work. They are not trying to be deceptive. They believe that they are doing what is best for the people they are trying to attract. Mormons are trying to "save" other people from doing bad things, like living together before they get married or having fun together on Sundays or a couple of nights a week instead of going to church. And so, it can be enjoyable to go to well organized activities with people who pay lots of positive attention to you and make you feel valuable, smart, needed, etc. Even your relatives are likely to push your buttons like this, with the best of intentions. But that does not change the fact that the objective from the Mormon Church's point of view, and that of those loving people who shower you with compliments and attention, is to turn you into a faithful member of the Mormon Church. Again, this is done because the Church's leaders and members believe that it is best for you. But it is easy for them to believe this because it is also best for – in fact, essential for – them that lots of young people grow up to become faithful Mormons. If that does not happen, the Mormon Church will die. So, all of that love, and those activities, etc. are designed to attract you to the point at which you will make the initial commitment that Mormons make – to regularly attend meetings. That doesn't mean the love is fake. Those people in many cases really do love you and feel concern for you. But, their belief system causes them to show their love in ways that are likely to reduce the number of good things that you will be able to do with your life by controlling your behavior and taking from you the right to make many important decisions.

The more friends you make at Mormon meetings, and the more your life comes to revolve around Mormon activities, the more chance there is that you will decide that you want to commit to the Mormon Church more deeply. This might be because you fall in love with a Mormon, or because you want the approval of your friends who are going on missions or Mormon family members to whom you have become close, or because you know that many people you have come to love in the Mormon community will lose respect for you if you do not go on a mission or marry in the temple, etc. These things, and many others, will have a profound influence on your attitudes and behaviour if you allow your life to be built on a Mormon foundation. And once you are under that influence, you will not be able to accurately assess information like what I am putting before you now, because that is how the human mind work. We are nowhere near as capable of making up our minds independently as we like to think.

And if you do go to the temple or serve a Mormon mission, you will make all kinds of promises and go through many experiences that will condition your mind so that like your Dad, you will probably have a hard time seeing reality as it is, and may waste many years doing things that are good for the Mormon Church and bad for you. It is my view that you are much more likely to be better off building your life on relationships and in a community that will not try to control as Mormonism likely will. I hope you will find a community where people will attempt to help you understand yourself, see outside your little box, and find a way of life that is well suited to you; something that is in your best interest, instead of something that is in their best interest and may be harmful to you.

I want you to bear this information in mind as the many people within the Mormon community you encounter try to tell you how much they love you, how wonderful their way of life is, and how "inspired", "wise" and "wonderful" the men who lead the Mormon Church are. Mormons may from a distance look happy, and their leaders may be well-intentioned. But the historical record shows in my view that the leaders are far from wonderful, wise or inspired, and the members' "happiness" is something most who understand it would not wish to share.

I hope these preliminary remarks will have two primary effects. First, I hope that they make you question what I am about to tell you as well as what faithful Mormons tell you. And second, I hope that they will encourage you to question the motives of anyone who pays you a lot of attention or does anything else that gets your emotions fired up. As a rule, we do not make good decisions when our emotions – love, joy, fear, etc. – are in high gear. People who encourage you to make decisions on that basis often are in the process (whether they know it or not) of taking advantage of you. Hence, Mormon history as told by tearful relatives or friends who tell you how much they love you, and at the same time how they "know" Mormonism (and hence their version of Mormon history) is true, are likely telling you the most unreliable version of history of all. And they are likely completely sincere when they do this. Mormon leaders know that the best sales people are often those who do not know any of the troubling facts about their product, and so can with a clean conscience say it is the best thing the customer can buy. So, Mormon leaders work hard to ensure that as many Mormons as possible (and especially the missionaries) don't know about the problems with the story they have been taught to tell. I innocently misled many people while I was on my mission. The Mormon Church taught me to do that, and took advantage of me. I now feel very bad about that.

The more of life I experience, the more clear it is to me that bad often comes from good, and good from bad, in unexpected ways. So, Mormons will be able to point to many worthwhile things that result from Mormonism, and many bad things that happen to people who are not Mormons or who have refused to obey Mormon rules. But on balance, it is in my view highly probable that people like you will enjoy much more of life if you chart your course outside of Mormonism. I hope you will gather as much information as you can about the alternatives that are open to you, and make a decision that will work well for you.

Now, on to some history.

How Mormonism Began – The Book of Mormon

Lots of people try to control others in order to make easy money or just for the sake of being the big wheel – being in control. Most of them get nowhere. Occasionally, however, one of them gets something off the ground, usually because he is smart, charismatic, and is using one of the tried and true methods for gaining influence over people. The best, and most successful method of all time in that regard, is to find out what the people want the most, and promise to give it to them. And many if not most of the people who do this eventually convince themselves that what they are doing is right, or good for other people, or even required by God himself. And most people have sincere, good intentions about most of what they do in any event. This kind of mental state makes it a lot easier to do the things that need to be done to allow people to get what they want. We all play tricks of this kind on ourselves to one extent or another.

It is hard to say why Joseph Smith (JS) did the things he did. No doubt he was the same bundle of conflicting objectives and emotions most of us are, and that he justified his actions to himself. He had spiritual leanings early in his life, and seemed to have a vivid imagination. His mother said that he told her all kinds of wild stories when he was a kid that sounded similar to the sort

of thing that ended up in the Book of Mormon. He also had a fraudulent side to his character. That may have in part arisen because of how poor his family was.

In the early 1800s JS tried to make money by using his "peep stone" (he would look in it and said that he could see where lost things were or where things were hidden – kind of like a crystal ball) to help people find buried treasure. This didn't work so it appears that he tried to come up with another way to turn buried treasure into a way to make a living. One of the many problems with his treasure seeking adventures was that the objective had been to find buried treasure, and since there wasn't any to be found, each attempt was doomed to failure from the beginning. So no matter how entertaining JS was during the course of the search (and I am willing to believe that he was highly entertaining – thrills, spills, near misses, offended ghost/guardians pushing the treasure deeper into the earth, etc.), in the end his clients were disappointed. And then there was the 1826 trial in Bainbridge he had to go through on charges of "glass looking" (looking in his peep stone and saying he saw buried treasure and getting paid to help find it - kind of like our laws against stock fraud and other forms of fraudulent sales). Scared the hell out of him. The judge, thank goodness, was practical enough to not insist on completing the thing if JS agreed to leave town. So JS did. This trial frightened him so badly that he even promised his father-in-law that he would go straight from then on.

Different people have different ideas of what the word "straight" means. JS dramatically cut down on the glass looking and treasure hunting, and came up with (or helped to come up) with an ingenious plan to use his great skills as an entertainer/story teller, and the idea of buried treasure, to make money in a different way. He (perhaps with a lot of help from some of his buddies, like Sidney Rigdon and Oliver Cowdery) would write a "true" story about magic, religion, and buried treasure that he could sell! This idea, incidentally, is similar to what a notorious con man named Walters who showed up in Palmyra (and boarded with the Smiths) had been talking about. He pretended he had an ancient Indian book about buried treasure that he pretended to be able to translate. And a while later, JS came up with a similar scheme.

In any event, he got started on creating Book of Mormon. Several books to which he was known to have access provided the outline and many ideas for his story. One that closely parallels parts of the Book of Mormon was even written by Oliver Cowdery's former pastor and had been recently been published near JS's home. Parts of the Book of Mormon also closely resemble some Masonic legends with which it appears JS was familiar. And a few stories from of his family's history were helpful too – his father and some other family members were quite the storytellers, and treasure seekers, too. All of this material made the story a lot easier for JS (and perhaps his friends) to write. But, he added lots of his own twists. Like, he made it an essential feature of the story that the buried treasure never be found! That solved the problem that had bit him in the ass numerous times before.

It is possible that JS had some impressive dreams or visions that he interpreted as giving him the license to make up what he did and lie about it. It is possible (as some people have speculated) that he had a form of epilepsy or other mental disorder, as it appears a variety of other religious leaders have had. His behaviour is consistent with that idea. And it is possible that a combination of these things contributed to his mental state. But, in any event, I think that it is most likely that he was aware that he was making up much of what he did while writing the Book of Mormon, and that he justified deceiving people about this in the same manner that he justified many other deceptions throughout his life, only a few of which are mentioned below.

And I forgot to mention how he wrote the book. He said that an angel named Moroni showed him where to find a book written on golden plates in a language that was kind of like Egyptian, which in those days no one knew how to translate. The angel also told him that he was to be given God's power to enable him to translate the book. He did the "translation" by putting his

peep stone in a hat and then putting his face over the hat so that it would be dark inside. He did the same thing when he used the peep stone to pretend to find buried treasure. He could put on quite a show with his peep stone and hat, and had a lot of practise at this. Then, the words that were on the gold plates would appear in the peep stone, translated into English, and he would dictate to them to someone else who would write them down. Most of the time while he did this, the gold plates were not even with him. He said he did not need them to "translate", since God was revealing to him what should be written down anyway. Does that sound to you like he was translating something? He was not even looking at the document he was supposed to be translating. That is not what I understand the word translate to mean. This was a regular problem with JS and with Mormonism today. He would use a word like "translate" and people would assume they knew what he meant when he had something completely different in mind. The same thing happens today when Mormon missionaries teach that JS "translated" the Book of Mormon without having any idea what he actually did.

All this makes me wonder why God needed to give JS the gold plates in the first place, or perhaps better put, why JS made that part of his story. Maybe the reason the gold plates were part of the story is that the whole idea started out with buried treasure, and then he found that it would be useful to have people say that they had seen the gold plates so that everyone would believe his story. In any event, this is what he did – he "showed" the golden plates to a number of his family members and friends and they signed a statement that said they saw them. Here we again run into JS's habit of using words that everyone understands to mean one thing when he likely had something else in mind. A number of the people who said they saw the plates also said that they did not see the plates in person, or actually touch them, but rather had some kind of a visionary experience in which they thought saw or touched them. There is no hint of this in the statement JS wrote for them to sign. Often it seems that when JS was talking about things of this nature he had in mind visionary experiences but used language that made people think that he was talking about actual or physical experience. Lots of people had visionary experiences back in those days, and were prepared to swear they were real. Some of the founders of the Shaker religion signed an affidavit that said they saw an angel on the roof of a house in broad daylight, for example.

There were a number of ways to "sell" a story like the Book of Mormon in JS's time. One was to sell the manuscript itself. JS tried that and it did not work. Another was to sell copies of the book. That was really hard, and slow. And finally, he could use the story's novel features (like explaining where the North American Indians came from – oh wait, that wasn't a novel feature, that was something he appears to have copied from another book; lots of people back then thought the Indians were related to the Hebrews) to become competitive on the lucrative preachers' barnstorming circuit. At that time, a good preacher was the closest thing they had to our rock stars. They drew huge crowds, and made a lot of money in some cases. JS was well-known as an impressive spinner of yarns, and even as a young teenager was said to be a pretty good preacher. Maybe he was trying to cash in that way.

Well, JS's plan did not (as is often the case with plans) work out as he had hoped. Only a few of the people who believed his story had more than enough money to buy a copy of the Book of Mormon, let alone pay a nice price for the manuscript and the right to make more books from it. But before he knew it, JS found himself in charge of his own church because a lot of people did believe his story. Most of them were poor and almost all were uneducated except for a few leaders, like the ones who appear to have helped JS write the book and are likely to have been aware of his lies.

The "Restoration of All Things"

At first JS was not comfortable in the role of the leader of a church, and said that all God ever wanted him to do was write the Book of Mormon. So, he found other people to lead the church, who were coincidentally the same friends that appear to have helped him write the book. But, he gradually grew into the role of religious leader, got rid of his sidekicks and consolidated his personal power. He used a complicated series of secret groups, each of whom was sworn to keep his secrets, to do this. When one group no longer worked for him, he would form another.

Lots of people start churches. Most of them go nowhere. However, JS had a bit of good luck and he turned out to have much more ability than your average treasure-seeker turned prophet. As time passed, his story became more refined. Much more refined. And more Christian. No more "toads turning into angels" to deliver ambiguous messages or spirits dressed in bloody clothes having been murdered by pirates. Pirates and their treasure was a regular theme for JS and other treasure seekers like him. These were parts of some of his earliest descriptions of how God told him what he was supposed to do. His later versions of the same stories told about how God, Jesus Christ, John the Baptist, Peter, James and John, as well as most of the key figures from the Old Testament, visited him on a regular basis, and told him specifically that he was to create a new church to which God would give the same authority Christ had when he walked the earth, and what he was supposed to do in other ways. And entirely new players came on stage, such as Moroni, who was supposed to be one God's prophets from the Americas. They also visited him. Some wondered if Moroni had relatives in Italy, such as the well-known Renaissance artists Giovanni Battista Moroni and Francesco Moroni. Many of the other names he used were novel and yet seemed familiar as well – kind of biblical or like the names of well-known towns. In addition, "Moroni" and "Cumorah" (where JS said he found the golden plates) were both names associated with a South Seas island that were linked to the pirate Captain Kidd, whose treasure JS had often claimed his peepstone could find, as well as the shipping company with whom JS father had invested in a ginseng import investment. Many other names were minor variations from names found in the Bible or related books.

Another interesting feature of the stories JS told was that they seemed to change, or grow, when his leadership was under pressure. For example, his story of how Peter, James and John visited him, laid their hands on his head and "restored" God's authority to him appears not to have been told until many years after JS said it happened. In fact, JS appears to have told that story for the first time when his authority to lead his church was threatened for various reasons. That story helped to convince many people that JS should continue to lead. Good thing he remembered that when he did! His friend, Oliver Cowdery, remembered the same thing at the same time. There is lots of evidence that Oliver believed in the "sacred lying" idea that is explained below. He and Sidney Rigdon, of all people, seem most likely to have been JS's partners in many deceptions.

In the course of all this, JS eventually ended up with as many paying jobs as he wanted for himself (like Mayor of a large city, Treasurer of same, commander in chief of a large military force, etc.), and was in a position to put lots of his family and friends into well paying positions as well. Things worked out OK for him from that point of view. But, he never became wealthy, just a lot better off than he or his family have ever been. And, as the behaviour of our politicians shows clearly, the ability to exercise power is enough to attract and hold people's attention even if they are not making a lot of money.

JS's Theological Innovations

JS was always interested in religion, and while writing his story he answered a lot of questions that had troubled him and other people like him, about religion. Why do little children need to be baptized? (they don't, since they are without sin) How can a loving God permit evil to exist? (good and evil are necessary opposites – one defines the other) Why do poor people suffer so much during this life? (because the next life, for them in particular, is going to be great!) Etc. None of these ideas were new, but JS's story stated them with an inspiring certainty. JS found that the more certain he seemed, the more people believed him. So, his stories became more certain as time passed. The people seemed impressed by spectacular claims too – angels; visitations by biblical figures; stories of healings; the assurance that Christ would return soon and that they were working to prepare the way for him; the assurance that JS and his followers would have a special and powerful role when Christ returned, etc.

And after becoming a religious leader, JS spent a lot of time thinking about other spiritual questions, like whether families can be together after death (yes, as long as they obey Mormon leaders); what happened before we came to this earth (we lived with God, obeyed him, and agreed to come to Earth for a test of our faithfulness which, if we pass by obeying Mormon leaders, will entitle us to return to live with him again, and become gods like him), etc. JS's genius for continuing to weave ever more complex, and in most cases satisfying, stories attracted a steady stream of new converts to his church. Lots, however, left once they got to know him and saw how he conducted himself. But as P.T. Barnum is reported to have said (although it appears he did not), "There is another sucker born every minute", and so the new converts continued to roll in, attracted by the amazing claims JS made, to which some of his followers attested.

It seems that people want to believe that they have a special role in the world, and that the future will be more wonderful than the present suggests it is likely to be. JS found that as long as he could keep the people focussed on the future, they were relatively easy to control in the present. That is, the things he promised in exchange for the people's obedience in the present were mostly to be delivered after death. That is the kind of deal it is hard to catch a guy on, unlike the "you have buried treasure in your back yard and I will help you find it" concept that was always going to end in failure for which the excuses offered for not finding the treasure eventually became unbelievable. So, JS was learning as he went. Religion was a better way to get what he wanted from people than anything else he had encountered.

Polygamy – The "Sex" Thing

But JS's problems became larger. Part of this was his doing. As almost always happens in human groups, the alpha male - the big kahuna, the guy in charge - has lots of opportunity to have sex with the women in the group. It is amazing how many religious groups suffer from this problem – how many prophets or religious leaders end up having sex with lots of members of their groups. So it is not surprising that JS couldn't resist this temptation, and even aided the process along by telling women that God had commanded him to have sex with them, and that both he and they might be destroyed if they did not comply. It was not the JS WANTED to have sex with them, it was that God had COMMANDED that he have sex with them. That, along with the alpha male thing, was enough to overcome the naturally virtuous tendencies of a lot of women, and so he was kept pretty busy.

And when he got caught in what initially seemed like a simple compromising position (having sex with a 16 year old girl – his wife Emma said she caught him in the act), he made an even

bigger mistake. Instead of doing the *mea culpa* thing, which would likely have gotten him off the hook, he allowed his story telling gene to take over, and told those who had to know that (as indicated above) God had told him to have sex with that girl, and that this was a sacred secret. No one must be told about it. In fact, it was so secret that lying was justified to protect it. This had the side effect of keeping what he had to do to maintain the many "spiritual wives" he accumulated to a minimum. Both he and the women in question had to pretend that there was nothing between them. So, he would rendezvous with them when the press of his many other duties (including rendezvous with other women) would permit. Otherwise, they carried on with their lives as if they had nothing special to do with JS, including in some cases living with their "other" husbands since JS did not restrict himself to unmarried women. In some cases – perhaps when the husbands were too much in the way – he would send them off on missions for his church.

Well, this seemed like a great deal to his buddies, and once they knew that God had told JS to have sex with lots of women, they wanted to find out if God would tell them the same thing. As God's prophet, it was JS's job to find that out for them.

I bet JS could feel the noose tightening around his neck as more and more of his friends pressured him for God's approval to start having secret sex with lots of women. After all, they were as righteous as JS; as committed to God's work. Surely God would not give him such a favour without allowing it to them as well? And the practical fact of the matter was that JS needed their cooperation. So, he said that God told him that they were allowed in on the game. And eventually, the rumours about this game became so widespread – largely as a result of some "unfaithful", killjoy women who refused to cooperate and went public with their stories – that almost everyone in the community and surrounding area heard about it. Since this was a sacred secret, this regrettably resulted in a lot of sacred lying - "Lying for the Lord", as it became known. JS said that God told them all to lie in this way because the "people were not ready" to hear about the new sexual practises that had been revealed to JS, his closest associates, and the women they propositioned.

This was one of JS's worst habits – not telling the truth, and using God as his excuse sometimes when he could not wiggle out in any other way. This made it tough for his followers who were not in on the game. The rumours and some women said one thing, and JS and his closest associates denied it. This went on for over ten years. The women who blew the whistle were accused of having loose morals, being liars, etc. This ruined their reputations in some cases. But, sacrifices of this nature are required to protect something as important as the sacred secret that God had entrusted to JS.

JS made some other mistakes, maybe even because he had come to believe part of his own story. After all, some respected philosophers at about the same time were telling people that anyone who has the ability to take and exercise power is authorized by God to do so. That is, power is self-justifying. JS seems to have believed that, whether he was familiar with those philosophers or not.

JS as a Translator of Ancient Records and Prophet

As noted above, JS said he "translated" the Book of Mormon from a form of Egyptian that in those days no one could read. And, since the plates from which the translation was made were never physically seen by anyone other than JS, this was a claim that was impossible to test by the ordinary means – having someone else redo the translation. But, JS's story was that he could translate ancient languages – that is one of the things a "Seer" (something else he called himself) could do. And so, he appeared elated a while later when an Egyptian mummy passed

through town and he was able to buy it. With the mummy came some papyrus documents written in Egyptian. Remember, no one could read Egyptian in those days, so it would be impossible for anyone to question whatever JS said the writing meant. And so JS "translated" the Egyptian writing, and found that it contained the story of Abraham, among other things. These stories supported the Book of Mormon and JS's theories about how heaven worked, how man lived with God before coming to this Earth, etc. However, eventually scholars learned how to read Egyptian, and the papyrus documents that JS had translated were found. For a long time they were thought to have been destroyed in a fire. At first many Mormons were excited about this – it was a chance to prove once and for all that JS was a real prophet and seer who could translate ancient records. But the scholars have translated the documents in question and it is crystal clear that they are standard Egyptian prayers and rituals used long before Abraham lived, and that were buried with many mummies. They had nothing to do with the stories JS said were in them. Some Mormons now say that JS was seeing hidden meanings in these documents; messages God left for only him or other inspired persons to see. If so, does that sound like a translation to you? And why did JS tell people that he was simply translating those documents? If it looks like a duck, walks like a duck, quacks like a duck ...

The people who were excited when the papyrus documents I just mentioned showed up perhaps did not know about a few other occasions on which JS's translation skills had been tested. Had they been aware of these, they might have thought it was better that the fire had destroyed the papyri.

In one case involving something called the "Kinderhook" plates JS was set up. Some people who wanted to expose him as a fraud made the plates and asked him to translate them. He did, and said they contained all kinds of important ancient writings that were similar to the Book of Mormon. Mormon experts have since admitted that this was a hoax.

This next story is not as reliable as the others since there is only one witness to it, but it is consistent enough with JS's way of doing things that I believe there is likely at least some truth to it. The sole witness was a priest who presented JS with the documents in question, and later told the story of what happened. The priest presented JS with something that he was told was a Greek document. JS examined it, and without completing its translation said it was definitely a dictionary of Egyptian hieroglyphics. It was later confirmed by experts to be a Greek document that had nothing to do with Egypt.

JS said, by the way, also that the word "Mormon" was Egyptian for "more good". That, along with his other pretended translations of Egyptian, turned out to be false.

Prophets are understood to see future as a result of the inspiration God gives them, or for some other reason. They usually use that ability to predict future events. JS made numerous predictions. Most of them did not come true, but some did. Many of his predictions related to the Second Coming of Christ, which he said was about to happen. This made a lot of people who followed him excited, as it has people ever since just after Christ died. That is, the idea that Christ is about to return to Earth has been used by various religious leaders ever since Christ died and up to and including today, to create a sense of urgency and a willingness to sacrifice within a group of people. If Christ is about to return, then things are going to be wonderful for the poor people who are faithful to him, and this makes bearing burdens and making sacrifices of all kinds much easier. This has been a powerful idea, and JS used it to his advantage while forming and maintaining the Mormon Church.

But Christ did not come, and has not done so yet. And many prophecies JS made related to this and other ideas were false. He even said once, after prophesying that some of his followers would take the Book of Mormon to Canada and sell its copyright there, that some of his prophecies came from the devil, implying that he could not be sure when he was prophesying

and when he was mistaken. It appears that he was often mistaken. But, as was the case throughout his life, he put on a great show and if some people got tired of his inability to produce the results he predicted and left him, others soon joined who were not soured by past experience with him. And the show went on.

More Problems, and JS's Death as a Result

At one point JS created an illegal bank in Ohio and tricked a bunch of his followers into investing in it. It went bankrupt as did some of his followers who invested in it. A whole bunch of people left him over that. He and his best buddy at that time, Sidney Rigdon, had to flee the jurisdiction to avoid lawsuits and jail. He was also guilty of counterfeiting. It took him a while to recover from that. But he did. He was, first and foremost, creative and resilient. He moved what was left of his church to Nauvoo, Illinois, and started over there. But same the same kind of problems with money happened again related to some land investments JS encouraged his followers to make. They lost their money and some went bankrupt while JS lived in a mansion and had his own river boat.

And then when things were getting really hot over the sex stuff in Nauvoo, he tried to pour water on that fire by destroying a printing press that was going to spread the word about what he was doing. And unfortunately, at the same time, news got out that he had recently had himself secretly ordained as King of the Earth, and had promised a whole bunch of people (many of them non-Mormons) that they would be the Princes of the Earth if they kept his secrets (he used secrets to try to control people a lot) and helped him to become King. This was all in anticipation of Christ's second coming, which he said was about to happen. Unfortunately, but understandably, the combination of the sex stuff, the printing press and the "King of the Earth" business made some people so angry, and afraid, that they killed him.

It would be a mistake to paint JS as a simple, black, villain. He was a complex character. Books continue to be written about his life. He loved deeply. He sacrificed himself in many ways, and often seemed altruistic. He was of unquestionable genius, and became a skilled speaker and writer. He had a significant poetic talent. However, he was not what he appeared to be, and tried so hard to present himself as, through most of his adult life. That is certain because of the different ways in which he presented himself to different people. He could not have been all those things. He was a showman who used his abilities to control people and get what he wanted from them. In short, he frequently lied about important matters, and hence could not, and cannot, be trusted.

JS (and other Mormon leaders who followed him) illustrate one of the oldest and most common human problems. People try to control each other, and often use improper means to do so. This is one of the most common themes in literature, television and movies, since they attempt to reflect life. Think of the movies and TV shows you have watched most recently, and how many of them deal with these issues. The movies I have lately seen are The Garden State, The Manchurian Candidate, Cold Mountain, and the last in each case of the Lord of the Rings and Matrix series. Each of these dealt with powerful groups of people (or things) who were controlling other people. The Mormon Church persuaded me that they were the only group whose wish to control me I should not question; that they had my best interest at heart and so I should simply obey. I now deeply regret having been taken in by that belief, largely because I trust my parents and others within the Mormon community who had themselves been deceived. I will not aid that cycle of deception and so am writing this essay and have done numerous other similar things.

Brigham Young and the Move West

There was a power vacuum after JS was killed. A lot of people who were accustomed to being led by a strong leader, and who wanted to be led, were without a leader. Nature does not allow vacuums to exist – it fills them. And many people love to exercise power. So not surprisingly, there were many who claimed to be JS's successor. Some of JS's followers accepted members of his family as their leaders, since they seemed to have the best claim to JS's authority based on what he said and did. Others followed Rigdon or Strang. And the largest group followed Brigham Young (BY), who put on the best show after JS died despite having likely the worst claim to his authority. Entertainment value again shows its power.

BY changed a lot of things, and made some crazy rules. His primary stroke of genius was to move his people to Utah, a place so isolated that they had no other options. He understood the power of monopolies, and how to exercise power in general. And scholars now agree with his strategy. In fact, they say that is very unlikely that a new religion can be created without a period of time in a monopoly environment to develop its strength. And once in isolation, with lots of land to give away, BY could attract new recruits with all kinds of fancy promises. The poor people of Europe flocked to him. And once in Utah (or Arizona, or Idaho, etc.) what were their options in those days? They were stuck. So Mormonism flourished. And while BY was an awful storyteller, he was in some ways brilliant from organizational point of view. And did I mention that he really understood power and how to exercise it?

A particularly entertaining chapter in Mormon history involved the dispute between the Mormon Church lead by JS's family (the "Reorganized Mormon Church") and the Mormon Church led by BY. JS's family did not believe that he had been involved in polygamy. They said BY invented that in Utah, and blamed it on JS. They thought this because JS had maintained in public, right up to his death, that he had only one wife and had not had sex with anyone else. Emma (his first wife) knew he had sex with other women, but did not admit to believing that he married any of them. The debate over this point lasted for close to a century. BY collected the best information he could to prove that JS was the originator of Mormon polygamy. This information included statements sworn under oath by many of JS's polygamous wives who said that indeed he had married them, and had sex with them. A project is currently underway to see if some of JS's descendents from those wives can be identified through the use of DNA testing.

The Reorganized Mormon Church eventually accepted that JS had many wives. The evidence used to convince them of this is now troubling for the Mormon Church because it makes it clear that JS was for many years doing one thing and saying another in terms of his sexual activities. That is, he misled a lot of people because he said God told him that was required. That tendency became a bad habit of Mormon leaders that continues to this day.

When thinking about BY and what he achieved, we should not forget the role of necessity - our greatest teacher. Plunk a group of people down in the middle of the desert, and if there is way to survive, they will find it. The Mormons found it, built irrigation canals, helped each other out a lot, and developed a close to air tight community in the adversity of the Great Plains desert in Utah. These were, mostly, salt of the Earth folk; fine people who had deep faith in God, their prophets/leaders, and their ability to overcome whatever obstacles might be thrown in their way as long as they stuck together while doing so. The kind of community they developed was precisely what was required in order to survive, and what anthropologists hence indicate tends to occur, in harsh environments like Utah of the mid-1800s.

We should also note that few remember the many communities that were similar to the Mormons but failed in their attempt to do similar things. We remember those who survive, and succeed, and often tend to see their success as inevitable, mandated by God, etc. instead of

the result of the laws of cause and effect, or dumb luck. Those who survive, after all, write history, and we can excuse them for preferring to see their survival and success as the result of more than chance. If God caused their survival, they are much more likely to continue to survive than if luck caused it. Since people like to feel secure, it is not surprising that they would accept the "God did this" version of events when it is presented to them. Kind of like we believe people who tell us we are good looking.

The "End" of Polygamy

In any event, the sex thing was still causing trouble in the late 1800s. Eventually, the US put so much pressure on the Mormon leaders over that issue that the Mormon leaders said God had changed his mind and that Mormon men were only allowed to have one wife. If they wanted to have sex with more than one woman, they would have to do it like everyone else – by sneaking around. For a while the Mormon polygamists (including the leaders of the Mormon Church) did that – sneaked around, having sex with their polygamous wives and even causing more polygamous marriages to occur, while telling the US government and many others that they weren't doing those things. And since JS had established the precedent a long time ago for deception of this kind, it seemed OK to most people who knew about it. The ends justify the means, as long as God has told you to do something. This works particularly well if you can decide both what you want to do, and what God is telling you and other people to do. That is, it works well if you are the person in charge and who everyone else thinks speaks for God. This is one of the oldest tricks in the books. Kings, popes and others have used it from the beginning of recorded history. For obvious reasons, this program often does not work well for the other people involved who are persuaded on the basis of "God's word" to do things that are not in their best interest.

The story of my great grandmother Paxman, who became the fourth wife of a Mormon polygamist leader during this difficult period of time, is gut wrenching. She lived a life of loneliness and sacrifice for "the Principle", as Mormon polygamy had come to be known. Eventually, her husband died, she had no claim to his considerable estate and came to Canada to homestead in order to find a way to make a living for herself and her three small children.

After between ten and 15 years of lying about their attempts to halt polygamy, the Mormon leaders finally said, "We really mean it this time" about stopping polygamy. But by then so many people had heard the leaders say "No matter what, no matter who says what, God will never take polygamy from the Earth – His word is His word and it cannot be changed", and had seen the Mormon leaders say one thing and do another for so long, that the Mormon leaders could not stop polygamy. In fact, some men started hearing God tell them directly and personally that they must have sex with lots of women. And so, Mormon polygamy continues to this day, and has ruined or made more difficult many thousands of lives.

Mormonism Goes Mainstream, and Tries to Shut Out the World

But the death (or at least crippling) of polygamy in the early 1900s was kind of a good thing, in an odd way, for Mormonism. After the prophets had fought for polygamy tooth and nail for so long, and finally had to give in, they realized that with the "sexually weird" monkey off their backs, they could go mainstream, and seriously international. And the Mormon Church grew as never before. Who would have thought that God would have inspired His prophets to fight to keep polygamy for so long if all they had to do was drop it in order to make the Mormon Church start to grow? God's ways are sure mysterious.

The world changes whether we like it or not, and eventually the monopoly BY had established in Utah broke down. People started moving in. They brought newspapers, books etc. And the communications media did not stop there. Telegraph, radio, television, satellites, and finally the Internet, pumped increasing amounts of information into Mormon communities in Utah and elsewhere. This caused people to question Mormon leaders and their authority with greater frequency. And those damn intellectuals and scientists! They were the worst for asking awkward questions, and some of them even taught (for a while at least) at BYU.

The Mormon leaders fought this flood of troubling information in every way they could. They told their followers not to look at anything that questioned the Mormon way. Such things were like germs or even cancer, they said. The Mormon leaders produced versions of Mormon history, and in particular its foundational events, that bear little resemblance to the way real historians see things, and filled the lesson manuals and other materials used to teach about Mormonism with these misleading stories. They sent out missionary armies of innocent young people to spread the Mormon message who had been taught to push emotional buttons by having their own pushed, and who only knew one version of the Mormon story (the misleading one) and believed it so completely that they frequently broke into tears while testifying that they "know" it is true. The leaders increasingly tried to control the information that was discussed in Mormon meetings by banning "private" study groups (that is, those not controlled by Mormon leaders), "correlating" the lesson manuals to make sure the same message was preached around the world, encouraging teachers not to look outside the scriptures and the official lesson manuals for information, etc. And many of their followers were obedient to them and did not look at anything the leaders had not approved. These people became increasingly inward looking – islands of Mormonism in a broader culture, whether in Utah or elsewhere.

But more and more Mormons either left Mormonism entirely, or became relatively apathetic, marginal participants. And their children tended to be even more apathetic, or to stop participating altogether. And Mormon women stopped having so many babies, despite the encouragement to "keep up the good work" by Mormon leaders. After all, if the Mormon birth rate remained far above the norm, eventually Mormonism would become dominant at least in North America. So, it was very important to Mormon leaders that Mormon women kept having lots of babies regardless of the consequences to their mental and physical health. But as noted, even with all of that prophet encouragement to have babies, the Mormon birth rate fell, just not as low as the average. The same thing occurred in many other aspects of social behavior. So, it seems that Mormonism could slow down the messages and influences coming from the mainstream culture, but could not stop them.

Mormon leaders responded to all of this by redefining Mormonism. It was no longer the church of weirdos, practicing polygamy who did their own thing in the Utah desert. It was the international church of the patriotic, nuclear family - that is the traditional family (man, woman and kids - lots of kids). Family values. National values. That was a lot more durable a foundation than polygamy and the Book of Mormon (as JS's story was called), which looked increasingly shaky as archaeological, DNA and other evidence mounted against it. In fact, family values are hardwired right into us by biological evolution, as long as some sex of the sneaking around variety is part of the deal, even though frowned on. And Mormons seemed as capable as other groups of dealing with that messy issue. National values are to an extent likely hardwired into us as well.

Social Trends Within Mormonism

As has been the case from the beginning of Mormonism, the ends continued to justify the means in many ways for Mormon leaders. They were concerned about things like spousal abuse and financial fraud that were rampant within their membership when compared to other similar populations, and warned Mormons regularly to watch their behavior in this regard. But that did not seem to help. The pressures brought to bear on the Mormon community by the differences between it and the culture by which it was surrounded, and which was encroaching on it, seemed too great.

That being said, Mormons report high levels of satisfaction with their lives, are community minded, are oriented toward family values, serving others, etc. In short, they display many qualities that have been prized by most communities of human beings throughout time. They tend, however, to dramatically overestimate how "good" they are in these terms relative to other groups of humans, or society at large. And we should note that any individual's subjective assessment of her own well-being should be taken with a grain of salt. Recent research indicates that the happiest people on earth live in Nepal and Nigeria, which have among the lowest standards of living and life expectancies. Most Old Order Amish, Hutterites and Taliban are happy with their situation in life, likely in large part due to a lack of information about alternatives. That is partly why the Internet is such a troublemaker from the point of view of people like the Mormon leaders - it makes people aware of alternatives. Even the members of Jim Jones cult at Jonestown reported high levels of happiness and satisfaction with their leader just before they joined him in suicide. In fact, they worshiped him. Their last words sounded eerily like many testimonies about Gordon Hinckley I have heard. So, it is usually much more helpful to look at more "objective" things to assess a community's health. That is, how do the people spend their time? How much information do they have access to? How much individuality does their behaviour display? How does their mental, physical and financial health compare to other similar groups? Etc.

While Mormons say they are happy, Utahns (70% Mormon) either lead or close to lead the US in personal bankruptcies, antidepressant use, rape, commercial fraud, multi-level marketing (like Amway) participation, spouse and child abuse and spouse murder, certain types of suicide rates, mortgage fraud, amphetamine use, worst), child abuse, software piracy, low level of women's wages, tax evasion, and low level of education expenditures. Utah has other problems that are not a closely connected to Mormonism's social influence, such as a high level of surface water pollution and water wastefulness.

These are clear signs of a group of human beings who are under more stress than those to whom they are being compared.

The Interest of the Mormon Institution v. The Interests of Individual Mormons

So, the pressures within the Mormon community are considerable. And in addition to those just indicated, on a regular basis Mormon families break up or go through terrible stresses that cause jobs to be lost and relationships to be ruptured as some family members (usually one spouse) stumbles across the "real" story of Mormonism, and react differently to that than do other family members (usually the other spouse). And gay Mormons continue to commit suicide at an alarming rate, likely at least in part as a result of being conditioned to believe that they must change their basic nature in order to be acceptable as human beings, to God, and to those who to whom they are most attached - parents, family members, community leaders, etc.

This kind of damage, from the perspective of Mormon leaders, is acceptable. It is the lesser of evils. It is the price that must be paid to preserve the Mormon institution, which with its long and illustrious history and tremendous value as a social institution and in the lives of its members, must be preserved at almost any cost. Did not the pioneers make heroic sacrifices? And what about those women whom JS successfully propositioned? What of their sacrifice? Sacrifice to God's will is the Mormon way. And Mormon leaders, from JS on down, tell us that they are certain that they are the only ones authorized to tell us what His will is. We must trust them, and not question them. They will look after our interests. So, pay, pray and obey. And if you won't obey, keep your mouth shut so that you don't infect others with your disobedience. If you won't at least do that (keep your mouth shut) you can't be a Mormon. You can be a Mormon while believing any number of bizarre things. But, if you insist on questioning the leadership you have to get out. That shows better than almost anything else the priorities of Mormonism.

And in any event, what would the leaders do if their life's work and self-esteem, and status, were pulled out from under them? So, while the sacrifices made by the members are regrettable, they are necessary from the leaders' point of view. And that brings us pretty well up to date.

Conclusion

So where does that leave us? We have been raised in a relatively repressive environment (by North American standards at least), and are now in a position where we question the need to obey Mormon authority. That means we have a huge number of decisions to make that we have not previously considered making.

Will we drink coffee, tea, wine, etc.? Will we smoke tobacco or other things? What about attending church of any kind, pre-marital sex or believing in god? Is homosexuality OK, and how about gay marriage? How should we serve other people?

I am not going to try here to review all of those complex issues, and the many others that could follow them. All I will say is that there appears to me to be endless possibilities in terms of how to live a good, fulfilling life. And, the process of thinking about what my strengths and weaknesses are, what I value, and how I can use my strengths and weaknesses to bring what I value into existence, is the most exciting and satisfying process in which I have ever engaged. I am, in a sense, defining myself; bringing myself into existence. Some people call this a rebirth. In a sense, for me at least, it is a birth. I have never existed before in some ways because of the degree of control Mormonism had over my behaviour. I cannot describe how wonderful it feels to proceed with that process, and watch important pieces of "me" emerge. I am discovering my own soul. Nothing is more important than this.

I no longer expect to find "the" answer to any question concerning morality, human behaviour or similar topics. This is not like certain aspects of math, where $2 + 2 = 4$ every time. However, I expect that as my perspective broadens by having more life experience and learning more of the life experience others have had by reading books, interacting with people etc., that my views will become more refined. I hope to become more tolerant and loving as time passes. I hope my understanding of what love means will deepen and broaden.

I am more excited now than I have ever been about each day as I awaken to face it, and I look forward with greater anticipation to the future in general. That is because I enjoy the present more than ever. There are so many things I hope to learn and do. The best analogy I can think of for my experience is that of a plant that has been raised in conditions of limited light and

nutrients, and is suddenly moved outside, planted in rich soil and watered regularly. I feel energy and growth pumping through me in a way that I did not dream was possible.

Up to my last breath I aspire to say as Michelangelo is reputed to have on his deathbed: "And yet I learn". Even while dying, he was learning about life and was fascinated by the experience. I hope more than anything else that my children will come to understand how I feel about the joy of an expanding perspective, and that they will know this as a result of experiencing it themselves. I recommend Richard Fynman's "The Pleasure of Finding Things Out" in that regard. Help yourselves. It is on the shelf in my library.

On the other hand, I recognize the wisdom in a statement I read recently but can't put my finger on at the moment that said something like, "to be free is nothing, but to become free is everything." I have recently become free, or at least much more free, and am still euphoric as a result of that experience.

You will, I hope, face other challenges than I have faced; climb mountains that are different and much higher than those I have climbed. It is possible that some of you, or your children, will read things like what I have written above and go "huh?" I would consider that a victory, because it would illustrate that I have helped you to get so far away from my experience that it does not make sense to you. I hope you and your children may be free for so long that you have a hard time understanding my experience.

Mt. Mormon was in my path, and much of my adult life has been, and will be, spent dealing with it. I willingly pay a high price in this regard in both financial and emotional terms so that those who come behind me do not have to pay it. It is better that I pay it once than you each pay it all over again in different ways.

I want you to know, for example, that the essays I written (such as this one) will in the aggregate cost hundreds of thousands of dollars in earnings I will lose by choosing to spend a bunch of time during the past couple of years reading, thinking and writing in hopes of making sure that the decisions I make and what I recommend to you respecting faith and religion are the best of which I am capable. That is how seriously I take this process. This is far more than a hobby or passing fancy. And I am grateful to have been able to afford to do what I have done in that regard. My partners have been patient with me because of the enormous contributions I have made to our firm in past years. But even with their patience, I have willingly accepted a decline in income to allow me to spend the time I have working out the religious issues that exploded into our lives just over two years ago. It will take a while to move my income back up to its former levels.

While money is far from the most important thing in life, it sometimes helps to translate things into monetary terms to bring them into focus. Knowing how much money this exercise will cost, in addition to all of the time and mental energy you have seen me expand, should assist you to appreciate how important what I have been doing is from my point of view.

We are past the hard part of the adjustment process now, for which I am grateful. As we move along from here, it is my hope that I will be able to introduce you to as many mountains as possible, and then watch with admiration as you make your choices, and start to climb.