

A FAILURE TO COMMUNICATE

Peggy Fletcher

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Cool Hand Luke was a movie that preyed naturally on my nascent sixties sensibilities. Paul Newman played the title character, an irrepressible nonconformist sentenced to months of hard labor on a chain-gang for decapitating a series of parking meters. He spends the remainder of the film trying to escape. His equally determined antagonist is the chief administrator of the camp, known only as "Boss" and seen mostly behind the reflection of his very dark glasses.

Early in the film Luke makes his first escape attempt and, when recaptured, is brutally punished. Boss watches unflinchingly and utters the understatement: "What we have here is a failure to communicate." The line is repeated again at the end, this time by Luke. He stands alone in a Church (note the symbolism), surrounded by armed guards. He steps to the window, raises his arms in a crucifix gesture of defiance and resignation (also revealing that he is unarmed), speaks the line, and is shot to death.

The message could not have been missed: persons of authority and large institutions (politicians, police officers, business executives, popes) are bad and those who "buck the system" are good, even Christlike.

My father was my date that night, and he really didn't like the film. "Life isn't made up of villains and victims," he cautioned in his ever fair-minded way, without saying much more. "Good and bad are more nuanced than that."

In my teenage precocity, I thought him closed-minded; as with many other issues, I now share his view.

Much more villainous, I have come to discover, are processes. There is a pattern of behavior known to psychologists as "passive-aggressive." This refers to the use of various communica-

tion techniques as a way of expressing hostility covertly. A passive-aggressive person often quietly acquiesces, feigns agreement, or avoids issues altogether rather than face conflicts directly. K-Lynn Paul, in an early *Dialogue* cites a few cases: "the alcoholic, who when angry at boss or spouse does not speak up, but who retaliates indirectly by getting drunk; . . . the wife who becomes 'sick' the day her husband had planned to go fishing; and the husband who, unhappy with his family relationships, pursues a hobby to their neglect."

She concludes: "These passive means really communicate the same message as open active disagreement or conflict. But unlike open disagreement, these methods cannot solve problems because the problems are not brought into the open."

On the personal level this can be a baffling sequence and can disrupt relationships. On the organizational level, this can be positively dysfunctional for both individuals and the group. Consider the following examples.

Ephraim E. Ericksen, by profession an educator and philosopher, served on the YMMIA General Board from 1922 to 1935. Having studied at the University of Chicago, he attempted to integrate his understanding of "modernist" ideas with gospel principles. There was wide enthusiasm for his approach among the young people of the Church as well as most of the other members of the board. However, in late 1933 the prevailing opinion of the leaders began to reverse itself. A lively debate about how and what to teach ensued during the next year and by January 1935, the board was dissolved. When it was reorganized, 23 of the 35 members had been eliminated, including Ericksen. Grandson Scott Kenney wrote: "Ericksen believed the release was probably necessary

and, in the end, a good move. Nevertheless, it was a heavy blow. After thirteen years of dedicated service, the Church seemed to have no further use of his energies." From that time until his death in 1967, Ericksen held only one Church position and that one, teacher of high priests in his ward, was short-lived.

Not only did Juanita Brooks suffer the "informal excommunication" for writing that seminal work, *Mountain Meadows Massacre*, but by association her husband, Will, was likewise condemned. She describes their treatment: "Will was such a sweet man. He didn't get embittered. . . . He was a high priest; he'd been in a bishopric down in San Juan County; he'd been in the bishopric under two bishops in St. George; he'd been superintendent of Sunday Schools for years. He contributed to everything. But after the book, he was never asked to do anything. He was never asked to offer a prayer, never asked to participate in anything, never answered a question in class." Juanita had been stake Relief Society president for seven years and on various MIA boards for most of her life. After her book was published, she was never called to any other position.

After twenty-three years, Lowell Bennion is still uncertain about why he was fired from his post as director of the Salt Lake Institute of Religion. When asked in his recent interview if he had ever had any "hand-slapping" by Church leaders, he replied: "No, I think Dr. West fielded the blows for us. I was never confronted directly, never called on the carpet. Even when I was relieved of my duties as the director of the institute, I didn't sit down with anybody who told me why they wanted to change the leadership there. I don't know that they were obligated to do that. Still, I'd like to have chatted with those that were responsible."

The situation of the historians (described in part elsewhere in this issue) under Leonard Arrington epitomized this sort of shadow-boxing. The experience of Dean May, one of the professional historians employed by the Church at the time, is instructive. With Leonard Arrington and Feramorz Fox, May wrote a book called *Building the City of God: Community*

and Cooperation among the Mormons which detailed Mormonism's communitarian experiments. Published in 1976 by Deseret Book, it was approved by the board of directors. The book was written while the authors were under Church employ and at no time during the process were there any criticisms of the book; they were never asked to change a single word. But after it was published, there was quite a stir. The book was not to be reprinted, it was not reviewed in the *Church News*, and it was added to the list of books that can never be mentioned in Church-sponsored publications. They heard through informal channels that some leaders objected to the word *God* being used in any book titles other than a General Authority's and that the book was somehow not "upbeat" enough. Still, moans May, "we were not given any explanation. Who generated the blacklist and why? If only they would have talked with us, expressed their concerns. We are all reasonably sensitive, loyal, believing Mormons. We would certainly have tried to understand and respond to their concerns. But we were never given that chance."

Davis Bitton, in his excellent article, "Ten Years in Camelot," voices their accumulated frustrations: "One of my personal disappointments was the lack of mutual respect and a willingness to discuss. Never were our critics willing to sit down and talk over matters with us. If we were inaccurate, we could be so informed. If a book had errors, they could be corrected in future revised editions. If we were violating the procedures set up by Elder Dyer back in 1972 and approved by the First Presidency, we could be told about it. But such conferences did not occur."

Leonard Arrington himself was released *ex post facto* in a letter.

The *Seventh East Press* was banished from the Brigham Young University bookstore with a single phone call to the manager. The editors and writers had no chance to defend themselves; once again they had no idea which was the offending article, if any, what their crime had been, or the identity of the authority.

In the army, this sort of maneuver is called "camouflage and concealment." In order to con-

fuse the enemy as to the source of an attack or identity of an opponent, soldiers are instructed to become indistinguishable from the surrounding environment. They darken their faces with paint and disguise their uniforms. "You can't shoot what you can't see or hear."

A central element in the game of war is the spy. In fact, in several of the episodes described previously much of the punitive action was precipitated by a "spy." When asked whether one of his faculty members regularly reported to certain of the General Authorities, Lowell Bennion responded:

"Yes. A young upstart, without saying a word to us, went down to the Church historian's department and said that Ed Lyon and I were teaching false doctrine. That word got to Joseph Fielding Smith, and I don't know to whom else. We heard about it from a friend of Ed's in the Church history department. So we called our colleague-critic on it in a nice way, and we had Ed Barrett come up to settle the matter. We asked our accuser to say what he thought was false doctrine. Then we explained our idea of revelation, and of God, and we were cleared by Ed Barrett. We felt good about our point of view, but we didn't have a chance to talk with whomever of the General Authorities were concerned."

Davis Bitton wrote of a similar situation: "One member of the historical department, a librarian, regularly went through anything we published, underlined passages he considered inappropriate, and sent these annotated copies to his personal contacts among the General Authorities. We were certainly aware of this and simply hoped that small minds would be recognized as such by those in positions of responsibility. We . . . never regarded ourselves as immune from criticism. But the behind-the-scenes, over-the-back-fence rumor mongering was insidious."

This part of the process seems to me especially ominous and unfair. Individuals ought to have the right to present their own cases to those in authority, ought to be able to defend their ideas, their teaching methods, or their published pieces in the full context of their work. They ought not to be represented by self-appointed intermediaries.

If there were a real enemy or a

real war, this might be forgivable and even appropriate. But we are all fellow believers in God's kingdom. It seems to me critically important that we talk with one another, reason together, try to be patient. We might have to risk an unpleasant, even painful exchange to air our concerns, to examine our differences, but such straightforward discussions are essential to understanding, to responsible and compassionate leadership.

An example so current that the outcome is still pending weighs on my mind. An outspoken and popular LDS institute teacher was told he must accept a transfer to another location or be fired. Knowing that transfers are rarely mandatory the instructor pressed the administrator to confess that some people in the Church education system were bothered by his "liberal" ideas, associates, and work. No names of his accusers were mentioned and no more specific complaints offered. When friends tried to plead his case with Church leaders, they were told, "We are sympathetic but can't interfere with administrative procedures."

This is failure to communicate at its worst. "Administrative procedures" taking precedent over individuals. Nameless, faceless middle managers making decisions without having to be responsible. And, as the bureaucracy expands itself into limitless anonymity, the problem is likely only to increase.

There are no villains in this case or in the others. No cold-hearted Boss, eyes hidden behind black lenses. No charismatic hero. There are only very human, very struggling individuals with unfortunate and, to my mind, unnecessary breakdowns in communication. Ours is a Church small enough and loving enough to put people first. We have no clergy because we don't believe in elevating one group above another; we minister to each other. We believe in learning from our mistakes, always growing, even into eternity. Without feedback, how can we discover the errors of our way? Our organization is established at every level, especially the local (ward) one, to provide the greatest attention to individuals. Our theology demands it.

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