

FROM THE EDITOR

MINDING THE GAP

By Dan Wotherspoon

FALL 2007 SYMPOSIUMS!

OUR GREAT THANKS to all who attended, spoke or performed at, or helped organize our two Fall 2007 regional symposiums!

SUNSTONE NORTHWEST was held 12–13 October. It opened on Friday night with a dynamic workshop, “Staying in the Church after a Crisis of Faith,” led by Sunstone executive director John Dehlin at the home of MOLLY AND ROY BENNION that more than sixty people attended. Saturday sessions, held in the Lake Washington Rowing Club building, featured panels and reflections on everything from how the “Bloggernacle” is affecting Mormon studies, to fresh perspectives on Noah’s Flood, to the Church’s new pamphlet about homosexuality, to the Middle East and becoming peacemakers in our own lives, to the sharing of personal statements of faith and commitment. Once again, Molly Bennion served as our cheerful organizing partner and as gracious host to eighty-plus attendees.



Sunstone Northwest attendees listen to Ron Schow speak on the Church’s new homosexuality pamphlet

SUNSTONE NORTHEAST, Sunstone’s first official gathering in New England in more than a decade, was held on 2–3 November. More than sixty souls braved a raging Nor’easter storm to attend one or more of the events held on the Harvard Divinity School campus. Attendees were treated to wonderful plenary addresses by Judith Dushku and Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, as well as papers on topics ranging from kingdom-building through international justice networking, to Mormonism’s relationship with Asian peoples, to the Book of Mormon as an Amerindian apocalyptic text, to music as a worship element, to James E. Talmage’s experiences writing of *Jesus the Christ*, to fascinating research into black Mormon converts in early Massachusetts, to autobiographical musings by a celebrated historian. The symposium also featured a panel of LDS undergraduate students at eastern colleges and universities discussing how their Mormonism is engaged through their educational experiences, a panel of Latter-day Saints who are currently studying at Harvard Divinity School, and a Reader’s theatre performance of memories collected during a Boston/Cambridge Mormon history project. The symposium was organized through the instrumentality of John Dehlin, who enlisted as a partner the incredible KRISTINE HAGLUND. But it all finally came together only through the energy and great connections of TAYLOR PETREY, president of the Harvard Divinity School LDS Association.



Jared Hickman



Taylor Petrey



LDS undergrads panel

Digital audio recordings of these symposiums can be ordered by visiting WWW.SUNSTONEONLINE.COM or calling the Sunstone office at (801) 355-5926.

LAST SPRING, LIKE many tourists on their first trip to London, my wife Lorri and I enjoyed learning to get from place to place on the city’s underground transport system, “The Tube.” We also got the chance to encounter firsthand the ubiquitous reminder, “Mind the gap,” which plays on the P.A. system as trains pull into stations and passengers prepare to board and exit. The phrase, a caution to watch your step as you transverse the small open space between the platform and train, has become a London trademark, a slogan one can find on practically every imaginable kind of souvenir.

Though they vary in distance from station to station, it’s pretty easy to handle the gaps one encounters in London’s rapid transit system. As we all know, however, there are many other types of gaps that are much harder to negotiate.

Psychological research into the root causes of personal happiness or anguish, as well as my own personal experience, shows that the “gaps” that cause human beings the most stress fit under the general heading of discrepancies between the “ideal” and the “real”—what we think would be the ideal thing to happen versus what ultimately takes place, what we would ideally say and do versus how we actually speak and act.¹ Add to these similar mismatches between anticipation and gratification, our expectations and what finally appears, and it’s no wonder we find ourselves so often depressed, disappointed, and sometimes even angry about the presence of this gap.

At this point, we might helpfully recall the first word of the injunction, “Mind the gap,” for when we look at what’s going on in this “ideal versus actual” dynamic, we can see that these terms are primarily phenomena of mind rather than matter, labels not substances, mental constructions rather than physical facts. Our minds are responsible for what we imagine as the ideal; our minds are responsible for what we decide is the real: “Is the glass half-empty or half-full?” John Hatch’s essay in this issue on the “PostSecret” phenomenon shows vividly how people can view the exact same object differently depending on the mind they bring to the encounter with it.

Anyone familiar with the basic premises of postmodernism or Eastern epistemology knows that I’m not exploring new territory here. We know this stuff. We know that our minds (with input from our sense organs, of course) are the major contributor to what we experience as reality. If this is the case, why don’t we “mind” this fact better? Why don’t we more often “mind” (forefront in our

awareness) the fact that we're the creators of the very gap that causes our own dis-ease and do something to mitigate the negative effects?

Over the past few years, meditation instructor Phil McLemore (who has a fun, short piece in this issue about his experience being interviewed for the Helen Whitney documentary and is also mentioned in the essay by Les Gripkey) has both spoken and written for Sunstone about the nature of our minds and tools for training ourselves to become more centered in the deepest realities of the universe.² I recommend his insights and prescriptions.

Can we learn about minding the "ideal versus real" gap from other fields as well? I think so. In what follows, I introduce an idea by historian of religion Jonathan Z. Smith about the way repeated performances of certain rituals can help reduce, in a healthy way, the tensions created by this gap. Smith's insights emerge in conversation with rituals in hunter-gatherer societies, but I promise I will bring them into dialogue with Mormon experience.

LET me begin with one of Smith's conclusions. Referencing the disparity between a group's sense of what it "ought" to be doing and what it actually does in practice, Smith writes in his essay, "The Bare Facts of Ritual,"

It is . . . as they face the gap, that any society's genius and creativity, as well as its ordinary and understandable humanity, is to be located.³

Smith's words immediately help us "mind" one of the most troubling aspects of the tension between the ideal (our sense of "ought") and the real (our actual behavior) by acknowledging that the tension is a basic characteristic of the human condition. Feeling the disconnect is nothing to beat ourselves up about.

Smith also speaks about a group's "genius and creativity" as being found in how, through its rituals, it minds the "ideal versus real" gap. Smith argues that one can grasp this genius through the creative way a community ritually affirms its ideals even as that group knows that these ideals are impossible to meet, given the messiness of life as it actually unfolds.

To illustrate his thesis, Smith examines the tensions at play in elephant-hunting rituals of the pygmies of equatorial Africa and rites surrounding the hunting of bears in Northern European and Asian tribes. All the societies Smith looks at share the same basic worldview regarding the relationship between themselves and the animals they depend on for their survival. In these groups' understanding, the "Master of the Animals," a deity who is in charge of animal spirits, gives to the tribe for their use a certain number of animals each year. In return for this largess, this "Supernatural Owner of the Game" requires of the tribe that they honor the animals by killing them only in prescribed ways and then treating the corpse with respect, including dividing, distributing, and eating it according to set rules. The tribe members must also perform spe-

cific rituals in order to return the soul of the animal back to the Master's care.

In the tribes' hunting mythology, the animal chooses to give itself to the hunter, who kills it only in face-to-face confrontation, strikes only certain spots on the animal's body, and creates a bloodless wound. When everything happens properly (including the performance of other pre- and post-hunt rites), the spirit of the slain animal is then understood to return to its homeland to begin a better life.

Now, as Smith points out, anyone who has ever gone hunting knows that it's impossible to come even close to meeting these ideals in a real hunt. Rarely does an animal seem to desire to offer its life to the hunter or face him as it's being killed. As far as the hunter's end of the encounter goes (especially in the societies under discussion, which hunt with arrows and spears not rifles), it's very difficult to strike the animal in an exact spot or wound it bloodlessly.

These societies are also perfectly aware of these impossibilities, yet each group still performs carefully constructed rituals that depict the perfect hunt, an encounter with an elephant or bear that proceeds exactly according to the idealized script. Some of these rituals take place before the hunt begins. Others—and here's what's fascinating—are performed immediately after the hunt is complete, within moments of the far-from-bloodless kill of a far-from-submissive animal.

In a powerful passage in the essay, Smith describes the way the pygmy tribesmen kill an elephant—"after shooting it with poisoned arrows, an individual . . . runs under the elephant . . . and stabs upward with a poisoned spear"—and then sing to it:

1. Our spear has gone astray,
O Father Elephant.
We did not wish to kill you. . . .
2. It is not the warrior who has
taken away your life—
Your hour had come. . . .
3. Do not make us fear your wrath.
Henceforth your life will be
better.
You go to the country of the
spirits.

After proclaiming in this way how it was really the elephant's initiative that led it to be killed in order that it might go on to a better world, the warrior exclaims:

- O honor to you, my spear!
My spear of sharpened iron,
O honor to you!

Smith summarizes this sequence as follows:

The progression is clear. (1) We did not mean to kill you; it was an acci-

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dent. (2) We did not kill you; you died a natural death. (3) We killed you in your own best interests. You may now return to your ancestral world to begin a better life. The final ejaculation may be paraphrased: “Never mind all of that. Wow! I did it!” (62)

What’s going on here? How can the ritual’s completely irreconcilable claims about what just took place be reconciled? Earlier in the essay, Smith poses a series of questions such as: “Can we believe that a group that depends on hunting for its food would kill an animal only if it is in a certain posture?” and “Is it humanly plausible that a hunter who has killed by skill and stealth views his act solely as an unfortunate accident and will not boast of his prowess?” Smith asserts that, of course, the answer is no. And he suggests that if we don’t want to consider the hunter in these societies to be “some other sort of mind, some other sort of human being” than what we are, we must understand that the members of these societies also know exactly how disconnected their hunting rituals and ceremonial addresses are from the “ideals” they hold about the hunter and hunted. (61) In sum, “the hunter does not hunt as he says he hunts; he does not think about his hunting as he says he thinks”—and the members of these societies are fully aware of this fact. (63)

So what’s the purpose of the rituals? Why would Smith suggest that there’s genuinely healthy and creative genius in such rites and incantations? And how in the heck can this apply to Mormonism?

FIRST, Smith’s theory of ritual. Smith argues that through their rites—and I’ve touched only on a few elements and rituals Smith examines in his essay—these hunter societies display a keen awareness of the gap between the ideal and the real and do it in a way that affirms the presence of the ideal even as they are actors in a world that make it impossible to live up to that ideal. Smith writes:

I would suggest that, among other things, *ritual represents the creation of a controlled environment where the variables (i.e., the accidents) of ordinary life may be displaced precisely because they are felt to be so overwhelmingly present and powerful. Ritual is a means of performing the way things ought to be in conscious tension to the way things are in such a way that this ritualized perfection is recollected in the ordinary, uncontrolled, course of things.*

I’m calling on myself to respect the important role that idealized scripts play in Mormon life and the reasons for their presence in our Sunday discourse.

He adds:

[B]y the fact that it is ritual action rather than everyday action, it demonstrates that we know “what is the case.” Ritual provides an occasion for reflection and rationalization on the fact that what ought to have been done was not done, what ought to have taken place did not occur. (63)

In short, Smith argues that the ritual enactments of a group’s vision of the ideal—the proper way things would be were it not for all the unpredictables that affect the way things really unfold—lift up an important dimension of life in such a way that it “can be thought about and remembered” even while everyday life moves on in its unscripted, impossible-to-fully-manage way. (65) Rituals help us “mind the gap” between clean, clear ideals and uncontrollable, messy reals.

FIRST encountered these ideas of Smith’s many years ago, but I started thinking about them again as I’ve begun to engage the 2008 Sunday School and Relief Society/priesthood curriculum. Because of our awareness of complicating factors both in the story of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon and within the text itself, I suspect that for many SUNSTONE readers, the Book of Mormon year, along with the year in which we study the Doctrine and Covenants and Church history, occasions more uncomfortable moments than the other years in the Sunday School study cycle. When we add the fact that 2008 also begins a two-year study of the teachings of Joseph Smith in Relief Society and priesthood meetings, I sense bumpy days ahead for many of us.

One of the main reasons for this discomfort, I believe, is that the presentations in the lesson manuals—and, indeed, in the Book of Mormon text itself—are deliberately crafted to present the various stories, personalities, and doctrines in their cleanest, most ideal form. Complexities are downplayed, and discussions of inconsistencies in the stories or in the behavior of the individuals being studied are discouraged, both formally in instructions to teachers as well as informally by furrowed brows and sideways looks as they are occasionally raised in class discussion.⁴

Is it a stretch to see a connection between ritual scripts dealing with the hunting of wild

animals and those of a twenty-first century people dealing with their most sacred stories? I think the connection is there and can be helpfully applied.⁴ Just as hunting societies depend on game for their very existence, we Latter-day Saints rely for our cohesion as a group, as well as for much of our own personal sense of life’s purposes, on the claim that, in some meaningful way, God broke through in touching Joseph Smith as a translator and a teacher of vital truths. I know there are many, many ways to coherently and empoweringly honor that basic claim, and I’d love to see our community expand its field of vision in this area. And in many ways, that is what Sunstone is all about.

I’m calling on myself this year to be more aware of and respect the important role idealized scripts play in Mormon life and the reasons for their presence in our community’s gatherings, especially Sunday discourse. I’m sure that as I engage these scripts, I’ll meet certain presentations of the ideal that I will not be able to relate well to at all. If the moment is right and I can share in a way that still respects worship and the overall purposes of the Sunday classroom, I’ll speak up. If not, I’ll spend the rest of the class period with my ears disengaged and my nose in the book I always carry to meetings for such potentialities. But I will come back again the next week, and if it happens again, the next.

My life is messy. There’s not really very much I can or do control. Although ritual repetitions are often tedious, often frustrating, ultimately I’m thankful for the way they reinforce ideals in a way that I can recall them even when life goes off script—which is to say, all the time. ☺

NOTES

1. A thorough and thoroughly enjoyable study of these issues is Daniel Gilbert, *Stumbling on Happiness* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006).

2. See Philip G. McLemore, “Mormon Mantras: A Journey of Spiritual Transformation,” *SUNSTONE*, April 2006, 20–31; Philip G. McLemore, “The Yoga of Christ,” *SUNSTONE*, July 2007, 30–45.

3. Jonathan Z. Smith, “The Bare Facts of Ritual,” in *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 62.

4. I believe Smith’s theories can be helpfully applied in relation to the highly formalized discourse that takes place during LDS general conference, as well as to the depiction of the idealized journey through life’s obstacles that comprises the narrative portion of the temple endowment ceremony.