

Mormon Relationships

It's About Time

bob mccue

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We need others. We need others to love and we need to be loved by them. There is no doubt that without it, we too, like the infant left alone, would cease to grow, cease to develop, choose madness and even death. Leo F. Buscaglia

Sometimes you see a person, and you wonder why you don't spend more time with that person, because they're like one of your favourite people. And then they say something and you remember why you don't. Anon

Introduction

I attended the funeral of a business associate the other day. He died tragically at age 50 of cancer. At his funeral were members of his hockey and fast pitch teams as well as many other friends and business associates. But the sports guys were special. He had played on the same teams with a core of the same guys for over 20 years, gradually drifting down through the divisions from "open" to "old fart" over the years with the athletic activity gradually being replaced by social relationships as the team's focus. This made me ache for what might have been, and decide to pursue the same kind of relationships at my relatively advanced age (47).

Relationships of the kind my deceased friend had are more rare within Mormonism than in other contexts, unless your ward boundaries and callings don't change for over 20 years. That is, personal relationships of all kinds are determined not by personality, what you like to do, etc., but by the way in which the Mormon Church functions. This is only one of countless ways in which the Mormon Church inserts itself into our most intimate relationships with the result if not the intent that our relationship to Mormonism remains primary and all other relationships subsidiary.

This social structure is not accidental. It is derived from Mormonism's primary objective – to create the strongest possible institution. Relationships are powerful personal and social forces. They can either be aligned to strengthen, or weaken, institutions. Mormonism goes out of its way to line up as much of this force as possible in its own interest. And by so doing, it impoverishes many of the important relationships in the lives of its members.

Hence, the personal relationships sponsored by Mormonism are relatively weak. Strong personal relationships, after all, could likely interfere with allegiance to the institution. All the way along the road Mormons are required in uncounted ways to affirm the primacy of their relationship to the institution. This is usually presented a commitment to God.

Consider the following in this regard.

Time and “Misdirection”

There is only so much time. If a large percentage of a person’s discretionary time is devoted to Mormon activities, there will be little chance to place life in a broad perspective and hence see Mormonism in context so that one might question whether it is what it purports to be.

This is a classic magician’s trick called “misdirection”. See <http://www.leirpoll.com/misdirection/misdirection.htm>. As the legendary magician Jean Hugard said,

"The principle of misdirection plays such an important role in magic that one might say that Magic is misdirection and misdirection is Magic".

That is, magic is performed by the magician using tendencies in human perception to make us look at his left hand while his right hand (or foot, or assistant, etc.) does something that we do not notice and gives the impression that magic has occurred.

One of my favourite magic tricks (and one of the few that is simple enough for me to do) is performed as follows:

- A group of people is seated in chairs and watching the trick.
- I put my hands in front of the subject’s face, and about a foot away from her nose.
- I show her a handkerchief with my left hand, and then while moving my hands around each other in a circular manner that is supposed to look confusing but not be confusing, I stuff the handkerchief into my closed right fist so that an edge is still visible.
- While doing so, I close my left hand into an identical fist.
- I then ask her where the handkerchief is.
- She points to my right hand.
- I repeat this procedure twice.
- Each time the subject easily spots the handkerchief.
- Then, having defined the “relevant space” and “relevant actions” for my subject, I know that her attention will be focused on the area around my hands in front of her and on what my hands have done the past three times.
- So, this time as I move my hands in precisely the circular motion I have trained her to watch, I release the handkerchief from my left hand so that it flies quickly over her head.

The flight of the handkerchief is obvious to everyone else in the room because they stand at a distance from the action that allows them to see the handkerchief as it hangs in the air for a second and falls to the floor. That is, their perspective enables them to avoid the “misdirection” that tricks the subject.

However, the subject only has the chance to see the handkerchief as it moves about 12 inches before passing out of her field of vision, and she is focused on the area a few inches around my hands. While the human eye is quick enough to pick motion of this sort up, when “misdirected” it will not do so. The subject looks foolish when she assumes that the handkerchief is in the right hand again, and is amazed when it is not in either hand.

Mormons have their attention so focussed on the minutiae and ritual of life within the Mormon community that they are in the position of the subject in my trick. Handkerchiefs of all kinds are flying right and left over their heads without them being able to see them. But of course, those who are not so involved in Mormonism – who stand at a distance – can see what is going on and react a little like those who watch my trick my subject with the handkerchief.

But then the table turn. Mormons can look at many of those who laugh at them (some Evangelical Christians, for example, who believe that the Earth is 6,000 to 10,000 years old and Noah really did get all those animals into the Ark, etc.) and see hankies galore flying around that are invisible to other people.

Such is the nature of cultural misdirection. We all have blind spots that only others can help us see. If we cling to the belief that we are uniquely capable of assessing truth and so refuse the help of others whose perspective is in some ways broader than our own, we will be forever blind in some ways.

While this may belabour the point, I think I should outline one more “misdirection” experiment. The point here is that misdirection in magic is based on based weaknesses in the human ability to perceive that psychologists and neuroscientists now study. My favourite object lesson in this regard can be found on the Internet (see <http://viscog.beckman.uiuc.edu/grafs/demos/15.html>, if you have a java enabled computer). It is a video clip of people passing a couple of basketballs between them. Five (I think) people are dressed in relatively light coloured clothes, are walking in a complicated pattern and are passing two light coloured balls between them.

If you can access this video, you may as well perform the experiment on yourself. So before reading further, watch the video and count the number of times the balls moves from one person to another. This is not easy to do because of the way they move in front of each other while passing the balls around.

After this short video ends (maybe 30 seconds) you are asked if you noticed anything “odd”. I didn’t. “You didn’t see the gorilla?” you are asked. “Nope” was my response. So you replay the video.

While the people are walking through their pattern and passing the ball, a man dressed in a black gorilla suit walks into the middle of the group, turns toward the camera, beats his chest and makes a face, and then walks out of the frame. It is that obvious. And I did not see it because I was focused on who was passing the ball to whom, and the gorilla was dressed like the background (dark) instead of the figures (light). But once you knew that something “odd” had happened and paid close attention, this was as obvious as the computer sitting right now on the desk in front of me. It was “magical” when the gorilla appeared out of thin air.

Such is the power of misdirection. And it is far from just a religious phenomena. It applies to politics, economics, social relationships of all kinds, etc. It is one of those fundamentally important things to grasp if one wishes to understand as much as possible of human behaviour, both individual and social.

To show how deep this runs, consider the unsettling story of how progress sets traps that destroy entire civilizations is really about the human tendency to focus on social fine points (like how quickly our economy is growing) while missing critical big picture imperatives (like global warming). Jared Diamond tells this story in "Collapse" (see http://www.newyorker.com/critics/books/?050103crbo_books and <http://www.davidbrin.com/collapse.html>) . For a shorter and much more accessible (if darker) version of the same events, see Robert Wright's "A Short History of Progress" (see <http://blogs.salon.com/0002007/2005/03/23.html>).

Mormon Misdirection

So, if we are sufficiently focused on the minutiae of living a Mormon life, the big picture will not be questioned. Hence, Mormonism (and many other religions that use the same system) are all about the details, routine and ritual of daily living, and result in such a busy day to day existence that there is little opportunity to think about where the train is headed.

This is not the result of the plan of some evil men sitting around in the Salt Lake Temple. Rather, this is how human social organizations of all types to some extent function, as already noted. They spontaneously organize to protect themselves, find the resources they need to flourish, etc. The reason that the rules of modern democracies are so important is that they run against the hierarchical grain of human groups, and so force human organizations in an unnatural direction. This requires leaders to account to members; this restrains the natural direction of hierarchical power; this requires information about how and why leadership decisions are made to be disclosed to the members.

Perhaps the clearest lesson from human history is that absent the constraints that democracy imposes on the power of those at the top of the social pyramid, power will be abused.

Mormon Relationships

How then, does Mormonism affect our relationships?

Marriage

This is arguably (and hopefully) our most intimate relationship. As such, it contains a power that can either work for or against the social organization. Mormonism adroitly harnesses this power to work for it. See <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.a%20few%20thoughts%20about%20Mormon%20Marriage.pdf> for this story at length.

The Mormon Church is institutionalized as a third party to the marriage relationships. Both spouses make promises in the marriage ceremony of obedience to Mormonism. If one spouse falters in this commitment, the marriage is in trouble. Mormons are encouraged to marry young and to immediately put down anchors in terms of the wife staying home to have kids so that if the Mormon Church's relationship to either spouse, there is a lot at stake that can be used to bring the one whose faith is faltering into line. It is this system, in part, that leads to countless social Mormons who long ago stop believing but do not dare step visibly out of line.

Other Family Relationships

I often thought, and even said, while Mormon that I deeply appreciated the way in which the Mormon Church helped me to raise my children. Early in my married life, for example, in exchange for my spending time with their kids as YM president and Bishop, others spent time with my younger children. Parents, I thought, could not do certain things for their own kids, and so it was good that I had a village to help me raise my kids. Parenting was a kind of cooperative.

What I did not realize was that by weakening the primary bonds between parents and children and substituting relationships brokered by Mormonism that are designed to foster obedience to the Mormon institution, the Mormon Church was gradually taking a control position with my own children.

I should have seen this coming because when my own ultra orthodox Mormon parents suggested to my wife and I when we married that perhaps waiting a year or two to start our family would be a good idea, we both thought that they were becoming a bit worldly, and accepted instead the advice of our even more ultra orthodox Mormon institute director (I was the LDSSA President at our university at the time and so had a lot to do with the Institute) to "not put off bringing spirits into mortality" for any reason. Baby no. 1 was born 9.5 months after our marriage.

When I told my children that my beliefs had changed, two of the oldest four were sufficiently conditioned by Mormonism (as ages 20 and 18 respectively) that they distanced themselves from me. Our son, who was serving his mission at the time, expressly refused for a long time to look at anything I wanted him to read because, "I respect your intellect Dad, and you have been deceived. Whatever has deceived you is likely to deceive me too, so I can't afford to take the chance of looking at it." He now says he will look, but as far as I can tell has not done so in a meaningful way.

Friendships

Friendships are usually formed on the basis four things: Neighbourhood proximity; children's activities; personal interest; and workplace or business interests.

The Mormon mindset (we are the chosen; we are in the world but not of the world; etc.), social organization and time requirements all interfere with each of these relationship forming mechanisms.

For a Mormon, neighbourhood proximity is not as important to the opportunity to be friends as which ward she is in. There is not enough time for close friendships with neighbours in the usual fashion because of the time spent attending to Mormon ward activities. And when the ward boundaries change or someone moves a short distance but out of the ward, friendships change. If you don't see people at the various church activities each week, it is hard to maintain friendships on the basis of the time otherwise available. And if friends move out of the Stake, or the Stake boundaries change to exclude them, they may as well have gone to Europe. I remember lamenting this many times as ward and stake boundaries changed or people moved to new neighbourhoods close by but in different wards.

Children's activities are dominated by Mormonism, and to the extent that our kids are involved in the community we run into the time problem again when it comes to developing non-Mormon

friendships. Just when are you going to see these non-Mormon friends, particularly if you are on the Mormon leadership track?

The same sort of thing can be said of the friendships one has at work or as a result of hobbies. Life's focus is directed toward what happens at church.

As callings change within the ward, and particularly as home and visiting teaching callings change, the amount of time we spend with different people radically changes. Think what happens if one is moved from the Elder's Quorum Presidency into the Young Men's Presidency? Or from the Relief Society to the Primary? Social life is largely reorganized as a result. Thus the message of obedience, and primary of the institution over the individual, is constantly reinforced.

How many true friends do you see regularly, once a month? How many of those friends consistently call you on the 29th or 30th and ask you to inconvenience yourself to set aside some time within the next two days for a visit? I remember flinching once before calling a non-member spouse of a ward member to do just this – knowing that it would be apparent to him that I was performing a duty instead of visiting a friend. But I did it. I apologized to him for the late call, but asked if he could nonetheless set aside some time the following night to chat with me. He sighed, and said yes.

And how many of your friends, after seeing you once a month, report regarding their visit with you to an institutional authority that you may have determined is not acting in your best interest?

I was at home later than usual in the morning a couple of days ago after arriving home late from a business trip the night before. As a result, I had a chance to chat with Juli's Visiting Teachers, who are both nice ladies with whom Juli has been friends (but not close friends) for years. That night, a conversation more or less as follows occurred:

B: I didn't think you still had visiting teachers coming.

J: Oh, they aren't really visiting teachers. They are just friends. We never have "messages" or anything like that.

B: That's nice, and I know that they are good friends. Let me tell you what I would do if I were in your shoes. I would tell them when they called to set up their classic two-on-one visiting teaching appointment that you are thrilled that they are your friends and want to come over for a visit, but you are wondering if they are still assigned as your visiting teachers or if they are just coming by as friends. If they say they are still coming as a result of their Visiting Teaching assignment, I would tell them that you are a little uncomfortable with the idea that your friends are coming over to visit and then reporting to the Mormon Church about your visit. Then, I would ask them if they would mind assuring you that they would treat your visits with them as just something friends do, and not report with regard to them in any way to the Relief Society or anyone else. If they agreed to that, then I would be happy to have them over any time.

J: I would do that too if I was rude.

B: I don't think that is rude. You would find out whether they really are friends, or if they are coming just because they are assigned to come. In my view, friends who only come because are assigned to come are not worth as much as real friends. Why don't you find out which category they fall into.

J: [silence]

The conversation ended there. But I think I had a reasonable point. If they are friends, great. But friends don't report as to their visits to someone else. Friends don't get some kind of institutional credit for visiting with you. So, simply insist that the relationship proceed on the basis of a "real" friendship, and see if the visits continue. If so, wonderful. If not, you know that it was not a real friendship.

There are a few people who become real friends as a result of home and visiting teaching. But at best, this is an unnatural form of human social association. It is institutional. And if a friendship happens to be spawned during the course of such a HT or VT association it is highly unlikely to endure. I was so busy while Mormon that I did not occur to me to try to maintain close contact with former home teaching families after my assignment changed. It was simply not possible.

And what of the sports team relationships that I noted my recently deceased friend enjoyed so much? Very few Mormons participate on teams of this kind. Again, they are too busy. If they play sports they are likely to be Mormon sponsored teams. Those are subject to the vagaries of Ward boundary changes and so seldom endure over many years.

Children's Friendships

On the way out of Mormonism we realized that we were in effect limiting our children's circle of friends to the Mormon kids. We were not doing this overtly, but as we stopped attending Mormon meetings our kids' friends changed. And in each case I can say that the "fit" between our kids and their friends improved. I believe that this is because the kids had a larger pool to choose from, and were able to find people to whom they more naturally related – with whom they more naturally resonated – than the Mormon kids with whom they used to associate.

God Is In Control

I remember becoming aware in my mid-20s of the reality I have described above, and thinking that it was a good thing. That is, I was allowing God to determine who I associated with and who not. That God would use this to bring people into my life "for a reason" and so school me in His ways. Among the many bad things that happened as a result of this attitude is the worst (by a long ways) investment I have ever made. A relationship based on a Mormon calling blossomed into a business in which far too much confidence was placed in my Mormon colleague in large measure as a result of my "this is God's way of guiding my life" attitude. I am still paying for this bit of education and will continue to do so for a long time.

Conclusion

Ironically, while trumpeting the wonderful way in which its communities and families work, the Mormon Church impedes the development of friendships and family relationships by keeping people so busy that they tend to have time only for relationships that are related to Mormon Church callings, and those relationships are kept relatively superficial because they are changed to suit the Mormon Church's institutional imperatives on a regular basis. This is yet more evidence of the way in which Mormonism puts its institutional interests ahead of those of its members. The image of human bodies being used as anaesthetized batteries to run the machine world in the Matrix movie series is a useful caricature in this regard.

And what of the Madison Avenue manufactured image of wonderful Mormon communities and families? It is just that – an image. In most cases, no more than that. And a powerfully attractive, manipulative and deceptive image at that. In classic literalist fashion, Mormons swallow this image hook, line and sinker. This is not because they are stupid. In the case of life long Mormons it is because this is all they know. They are susceptible to their inherited beliefs in the way all humankind is, as indicated by the description of “misdirection” above.

And it is easy to understand why many Mormon converts would be susceptible to this marketing approach. There is a lot of sizzle, and if one ever gets to the point where she can see how tiny (or non-existent) the steak is, enough conditioning has been done, and a life (or a family’s life) has been built in social circumstances that makes breaking up hard to do.

I do not suggest that all Mormon relationships are worthless. Far from that. I particularly acknowledge that to those within Mormonism who do not know any other way of life, the security and certainty they perceive in their community and its relationships will be a big part of what they value. Mormons who read this will likely think I am a bitter apostate who has “lost the spirit” if he ever had it, and does not understand Mormonism. I, on the other hand, say that fish cannot understand water. Those who have been both on the inside and the outside of a social group have a much better chance of understanding it than those who have only been on the inside.

I still value many of my Mormon friendships. However, it is clear that Mormonism’s primary interest is a strong institution. Hence, its social structures are set up with this as the primary objective and as a result, the relationships sponsored by Mormonism are poor relative to what can be expected of relationships formed on a more organic basis in the community at large.

Remember to watch for the gorilla.