

An Aim For the Noblest Desire

For your careful . . .

. . . and thoughtful consideration.

Introduction

The pursuit of knowledge and truth. That's really what we're about, isn't it? As citizens of Planet Earth, as affiliates of this university, and most especially as members of the Church of Jesus-Christ of Latter-day Saints, knowledge is our business. Of course, the pursuit of knowledge is one thing, but it's quite another thing to catch it! To "get it," that's the end toward which we aim. Or to use another word—a longer word—to *apprehend* truth—as when the long arm of the law reaches out to apprehend a criminal. We really do want to get it, and not be as Paul described to Timothy "ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth"—which capped his list of awful things he prophesied would be part and parcel of the perilous times of the last days.

Which days we are in. My aim here is, with help from other sources, the sharing of my own quirky angle on this subject, acquired over the course of my days on Planet Earth. I wish to reveal to you a tiny bit of the current state of my quest—my personal odyssey—and I also earnestly hope that the Spirit will edify and uplift you in the process. Because as we know, "The Spirit speaketh the truth and lieth not. Wherefore, it speaketh of things as they really are, and of things as they really will be." (Jacob 4:13)

Logic and Truth

The following is an excerpt from "The Office of Bishop in the Church in Rome" — from the book *Apostles and Bishops in Early Christianity* by Hugh Nibley.

Once there was a man who boasted of being a direct descendant of Abraham Lincoln. To prove his claim he would quote the Gettysburg address with the flaming challenge: "Deny if you can that Lincoln wrote *that!*" No one wants to deny it, we would tell such an one, but what has that got to do with your claims? The Roman Catholics quote certain words of the Lord to Peter, indicating that Peter was to become president of the church, and think thereby that they have demonstrated not only Peter's claim on the Lord, but through some mysterious logic their claim on Peter, though the Lord said not a word about his successors, let alone about the city of Rome. The most undeniable proof that it is raining does not prove that it is Tuesday. What the Roman Catholics have to prove is not that the Savior bestowed office on Peter, but that Peter bestowed office on them; to date they have thought to settle the whole question by endless repetition of the irrelevant "thou art Peter."

Of course, intelligent Catholics recognize the true issue. The greatest of all their scholars in modern times, Louis Duchesne, devoted his whole life to seeking for some definite tie between Peter and his church—and failed to find it. Nevertheless, we are assured, if Peter was to be head of a church, there surely was to *be* a church, and what more likely candidate than ours? Again they make their point by assuming a thing that is not said or even hinted at in the scripture: that there would be a permanent church.

Orson Scott Card paid the following tribute to Hugh Nibley shortly after his death in 2005:

I clearly remember the epiphany I had as a child: If someone this smart, this rigorous of thought, this widely and deeply educated believes that Joseph Smith was a prophet, the Book of Mormon is true, and the Church is God's kingdom on earth, then I will not let myself get swept away by whatever questions come up during my life. I'll question my questions, I'll doubt my doubts, confident that one way or another, everything will be reconciled.

In other words, truth is truth, but our understanding of it at any point in time is bound to be so limited that even our knowledge contains enough ignorance that it's foolish to jettison something important and good merely because of slight, temporary contradictions.

The only thing that makes "intellectuals" lose their testimony of the truth of the gospel is their own failure to be skeptical of their skepticism—their failure to subject their worldly "evidence" to the same level of rigorous questioning they apply to the gospel.

In other words, the problem isn't that they have doubts—it's that they don't have enough doubts. They strain at some gnat in the gospel, while swallowing camels from the outside world.

Now consider the following excerpt from Card's book "A Storyteller in Zion" — I call it "if only" for reasons that will be apparent — not to be confused with the preferred reading of the condition (\rightarrow) operator — "only if"!

The Lord defined truth as things as they are, as they were, and as they will be. But as long as we remain human, we are consistently at least one step away from the truth. In the search for truth, we have no direct contact with things as they are, were, and will be. Past events are relayed to us through observers, who, no matter how honest they were, still color their observations with their prejudices. Our own prejudices cloud our vision of things as they are. The prophets relay to us a vision of the future, but it is impossible to collate those visions into a clear, accurate forecast of all that will take place. We discover truth through many means. Observation tells us not what happened, but what was observed to have happened. Generalization tells us not what happens, but what has always happened in similar or identical cases so far. Prediction tells us not what will happen, but what the evidence leads some individuals to believe will happen. Prescription tells us not what *should* happen, but what individuals *desire* to have happen. Whether it will really be good or not will only be revealed in the actual event.

Indeed, the shakiest of all approaches to truth is prescription, because it invariably depends on the accuracy of our prediction. When a doctor prescribes penicillin, it is because penicillin has been proven many times in the past to relieve the particular symptoms you exhibit. It is because of the doctor's prediction that penicillin will cure your ailment that he prescribes it.

There is a great deal of evidence to support the idea that penicillin is worth prescribing. However, when you move away from physics, chemistry, or the other hard sciences, prediction gets pretty shaky. Into the realm of history and politics and psychology and sociology prediction ceases to be what *will* happen—it becomes what *might* happen. Despite the much vaunted repetitiveness of history, history does not repeat in detail. Empires may rise and fall along the same patterns, but in its relentless progression the event still unwinds one day at a time, and no two days are ever identical. So predictions of human behavior—those grand speculations on what *might* happen—are not based on experience of what happens every time the experiment is repeated. Those predictions are based on conclusions drawn from a collection of independent events that may or may not have relation to the event in question. In predicting human behavior, we find ourselves relying on statements that boil down to what might have happened, what we *think* happened, and—the most dangerous of all—what would have happened *if only*.

If only. If only there had not been sex education in school, my daughter would not be pregnant. If only there *had* been sex education in school, my daughter would not be pregnant.

If only textbooks could be brought into line, our children would not think incorrect thoughts.

If only the novels that showed sex and violence could be banned, our terrible crime problems would be solved.

If only John Gacy's father had not been cold and distant from him, Gacy would not have killed a score of innocent young men.

If only we could get people to stop mentioning ugliness, the world would be beautiful.

So much prescription depends on that phrase "if only." And yet "if only" contains two vicious lies that make that phrase the eternal enemy of truth.

The first lie is the word *only*: Its root is the word *one*, implying a singleness that never occurs in real life. It implies that a single change would have a single effect, which is absurd on its face—for instance, the popular lie that *if only* Chamberlain had not tried to pacify Hitler and instead had taken firm action years earlier to stop the Hitler menace, the Second World War could have been avoided. Isn't that nice? Isn't it pleasant to think wistfully about how easily such a tragedy could be avoided, and how easily we could avoid it in the future? Yet Chamberlain's pacification attempts were themselves an effect, not a cause. If he had even suggested going to war with Hitler before the invasion of Poland, his government would have collapsed and the English would have replaced him with a government that would try, as he did, to avoid war. And if England and France had invaded Germany long before Hitler's buildup was complete, wouldn't we today condemn that action as vicious warmongering? There is no single cause of an event, and no single result from any change.

The second lie is the word *if*: *If* implies that the predictor has a perfect knowledge of the cause-and-effect chain. But that perfect knowledge has not been vouchsafed to any man. That is one of the meanings of the veil that blinds us to eternal things. We live in time, day to day, and the world is narrowed to what we can perceive with our own senses and learn from those who teach us. If we had the perfect knowledge that God has, it would be no test for us here; we are kept in ignorance because only in ignorance are we able to reveal to God and to ourselves who we really are. We do not know what would have happened *if only* we had done something different; we only know the desires of our own heart, and the act, but not the long string of consequences that extends infinitely from the act. We are not so implacable as the Greeks. We Latter-day Saints do not believe that God would punish Oedipus for sins he never desired to commit. "If only" has no meaning to us.

A Proverb

Tell me a fact, and I'll learn.

Tell me a truth, and I'll believe.

The Shape of Truth

Truth! We all knew the truth but we insisted on distorting things to make it seem like we were all, with each other, in such profound disagreement about everything — that first and foremost there are two sides to everything, when of course there were not; there was one side only, one side always: Just as this earth is round, the truth is round, not two-sided but ROUND ...

— From *You shall know our velocity* by Dave Eggers

The Weave of Truth

The Spirit of God speaking to the spirit of man has power to impart truth with greater effect and understanding than the truth can be imparted by personal contact even with heavenly beings. Through the Holy Ghost the truth is woven into the very fibre and sinews of the body so that it cannot be forgotten.

— From *Doctrines of Salvation* by President Joseph Fielding Smith

The Prophecy and Reality Connection

“If one of your prophecies comes true, Bill Blake, then I’ll believe it, but not until.” [. . .]

In the years since then, Taleswapper [aka Bill Blake] had searched for the fulfilment of even one prophecy. Yet whenever he thought he had found such a fulfilment, he could hear Old Ben’s voice in the back of his mind, providing an alternate explanation, scoffing at him for thinking that any connection between prophecy and reality could be true.

“Never *true*,” Old Ben would say. “Useful—now, there’s something. Your mind might make a connection that is useful. But *true* is another matter. True implies that you have found a connection that exists independent of your apprehension of it, that would exist whether you noticed it or not. And I must say that I have never seen such a connection in my life. There are times when I suspect that there are no such connections, that all links, bonds, ties, and similarities are creatures of thought and have no substance.”

“Then why doesn’t the ground dissolve beneath our feet?” asked Taleswapper.

“Because we have managed to persuade it not to let our bodies by. Perhaps it was Sir Isaac Newton. He was such a persuasive fellow. Even if human beings doubt him, the ground does not, and so it endures.” Old Ben laughed. It was all a lark to him. He never could bring himself to believe even his own skepticism.

Now, sitting at the base of the tree, his eyes closed, Taleswapper connected again: The tale of Noah with Old Ben. Old Ben was Ham, who saw the naked truth, limp and shameful, and laughed at it, while all the loyal sons of church and university walked backward to cover it up again, so the silly truth would not be seen. Thus the world continued to think of the truth as firm and proud, never having seen it in a slack moment.

That is a true connection, thought Taleswapper. That is the meaning of the story. That is the fulfilment of the prophecy. The truth when we see it is ridiculous, and if we wish to worship it, we must never allow ourselves to see it.

... Later, Taleswapper meets Alvin Miller (aka Alvin Maker), and at one point in the story describes the unseen enemy Alvin has told him he has nightmares about:

“[The] Unmaker [is] the enemy of everything that exists. All it wants is to break everything into pieces, and break those pieces into pieces, until there’s nothing left at all. [...]

In the great war against the Unmaker [...] all the men and women of the world should be allies. But the great enemy remains invisible, so that no one guesses that they unwittingly serve him. They don’t realize that war is the Unmaker’s ally, because it tears down everything it touches. They don’t understand that fire, murder, crime, cupidity, and concupiscence break apart the fragile bonds that make human beings into nations, cities, families, friends, and souls.” [...]

It came together in Alvin’s mind. The whole story that the Taleswapper was trying to tell. Alvin knew all kinds of opposites in the world: good and evil, light and dark, free and slave, love and hate. But deeper than all those opposites was making and unmaking. So deep that hardly anybody noticed that it was the most

important opposite of all. But *he* noticed, and so that made the Unmaker his enemy. That's why the Unmaker came after him in his sleep. After all, Alvin had his knack. His knack for setting things in order, putting things in the shape they ought to be in.

(*More discussion leads to an idea that Alvin can't bring himself to believe, but Taleswapper does, although he admits it has problems. Said Alvin:*)

"[But just] because you believe [something] doesn't make it so."

Taleswapper reached out both arms toward him, took Alvin's face between his hands, and spoke with such force as to drive the words deep into Alvin's forehead. "Everything possible to be believed is an image of truth."

And the words *did* pierce him, and he understood them, though he could not have put in words what it was he understood. Everything possible to be believed is an image of truth. If it feels true to me, then there is something true in it, even if it isn't all true. And if I study it out in my mind, then maybe I can find what parts of it are true, and what parts are false, and—

And Alvin realized something else. That all his arguments with Thrower came down to this: that if something just plain didn't make sense to Alvin, he didn't believe it, and no amount of quoting from the Bible would convince him. Now Taleswapper was telling him that he was *right* to refuse to believe things that made no sense. "Taleswapper, does that mean that what I *don't* believe *can't* be true?"

Taleswapper raised his eyebrows and [replied:] "Truth can never be told so as to be understood, and not be believed."

— From *Seventh Son* by Orson Scott Card.

Get Real!

Do you believe this?

Real life is response to the best within us. To be alive only to appetite, pleasure, pride, money-making, and not to goodness and kindness, purity and love, poetry, music, flowers, stars, God and eternal hopes, is to deprive one's self of the real joy of living."

— David O. McKay, Conference Report, October 1963, 7.

To be alive to the latter list (goodness and kindness, etc.) lights a clear path toward what President McKay called . . .

True Education

. . . being that which "seeks to make men and women not only good mathematicians, proficient linguists, profound scientists, or brilliant literary lights, but also, honest men [and women], with virtue, temperance, and brotherly love. It seeks to make men and women who prize truth, justice, wisdom, benevolence, and self-control as the choicest acquisitions of a successful life."

—*Treasures of Life*, comp. Clare Middlemiss (1962), 472.

Back to Alvin and Taleswapper

“Truth can never be told so as to be understood, and not be believed.”

But truth be told, for their trouble, truthtellers end up dead as often as not.

“Everybody ends up dead,” said Taleswapper. “But some who are dead live on in their words.”

“Words never stay straight,” said Alvin. “Now, when I *make* a thing, then it’s the thing I made. Like when I make a basket. It’s a basket. When it gets tore, then it’s a tore-up basket. But when I say words, they can get all twisted up. Thrower can take those same very words I said and bend them back and make them mean just contrary to what I said.”

“Think of it another way, Alvin. When you make one basket, it can never be more than one basket. But when you say words, they can be repeated over and over, and fill men’s hearts a thousand miles from where you first spoke them. Words can magnify, but things are never more than what they are.”

— Also from *Seventh Son* by Orson Scott Card.

The Power of Words

An undisputed master of language, Edgar Allan Poe once said with no small hubris:

How very commonly we hear it remarked that such and such thoughts are beyond the compass of words! I do not believe that any thought, properly so called, is out of the reach of language. I fancy, rather, that where difficulty in expression is experienced, there is, in the intellect which experiences it, a want either of deliberateness or of method.

For my own part, I have never had a thought which I could not set down in words, with even more distinctness than that with which I conceived it: — as I have before observed, the thought is logicalised by the effort at (written) expression.”

The Words of Power

Since the dawn of the scientific revolution in the 1600s, the nature of language has changed. We demand more clarity of expression in our depictions of truth. Logic rules, and objective reporting is sought. This is the age of information and fact. Language was once more emotive, designed to produce feelings and states of soul as well as to impart information. The manner in which truth was presented was as critical as the truth itself. God is aware of these shifts in our world and adapts his revelatory methods and wording in accordance with our ability to perceive them. This the Lord himself acknowledged in the scriptures: ‘These commandments . . . were given unto my servants in their weakness, *after the manner of their language, that they might come to understanding.*’ (Doctrine and Covenants 1:24, emphasis added.) Therefore it is not surprising that the latest book of scripture is the Doctrine and Covenants. In our modern world, we are better able to receive truth in this line-upon-line, precept-upon-precept kind of revelation. If we are to fathom the rich depths of John’s contribution to the scriptural canon, however, we will need to reason and think less scientifically and more poetically, less in modern exposition and more in the ancient flow of descriptive words. We will need to explore the power of language in an older mode, one that aimed at beauty and majesty of expression as much as the presentation of knowledge.”

—S. Michael Wilcox, *Who Shall Be Able To Stand? Finding Personal Meaning in the Book of Revelation*, 9-10.

What is Fiction Good For?

From a writer of nonfiction — Steven Pinker:

A puzzle that I wonder about is why our species takes so much pleasure in fictional narratives in general. Storytelling is universal; it's done in all cultures. And it emerges early in our lives, as we see from the delight that children take in stories. But why do people devote so much brain power to creating and appreciating tales of things that aren't true? Literature is a pack of lies. There never was a Hamlet. Eliza Doolittle never existed. But still, we can't get enough of it. And we also have the sense that storytelling is inherently worthy. It's not a waste of time to appreciate good fiction.

One problem we all face is how to act in a world that presents a vast combinatorial space of possibilities, especially when it comes to other people. I can do any of ten things, and you can do any of ten things in response to each of those ten things, and I can do ten things in response to your response, and so on. There is an explosion of possibilities that no mortal mind can deduce in advance. What fiction might do is allow people to play out, in their minds' eyes, hypothetical courses of action in hypothetical circumstances, which would then allow them to anticipate what would happen if they ever faced those situations in reality. [...]

For an adaptive hypothesis to be taken seriously, there should be some independent reason to believe that the trait really is a good engineering solution to the problem. We don't want to just invent any old story for why some part of the mind is useful, just because we know that the mind has that part.

In this case, I think there is an independent rationale. It comes from the approach to artificial intelligence called case-based reasoning, in which the best way to solve a problem is to analogize it to some similar problem encountered in the past, rather than cranking out a set of deductions using logical rules. So the system keeps a library of cases in memory and refers back to them when solving a similar problem. Perhaps fiction is a kind of case-based reasoning. It multiplies the number of scenarios that you have tucked away in your mind and that you can call on as a guide for a future action. Of course, for that to work, there have to be constraints in the fictional worlds. It can't be true that anything can happen, or else what plays out in a fictional plot would have no lessons for real life.

A Storyteller in Zion

Orson Scott Card, again:

Everyone knows that artists don't change the world, they just get reviewed, right? Presidents, generals, lawyers, corporate CEOs – *they* change the world: artists just decorate it, right?

Wrong. We who learn to create artworks and share them with the audience, *we invent* the world. We put visions and music and stories into people's memories. Even when the audience for our works is small, they have received a priceless gift, for there is a place in their memories where, because of our work, all the people in that audience are the same.

Sharing the shaped reality of art is the closest we come in this world to truly knowing what is inside another person's heart and mind. For a moment, as an audience, as a community, we are one.

It's no coincidence that so much of Christ's labor in this life was devoted to creating works of art. His great atonement and sacrifice was and is an eternal act that transcends any mortal analogy. But of his other, more temporal works, which remain? The Church he founded eventually failed him. His doctrines were distorted, forgotten, and lost. His followers were slain. The people he healed eventually died.

But his stories, those deceptively simple parables, persisted. Where doctrines consisting of language can be and usually *are* reinterpreted into convenient new meanings, stories consisting of the causal relationships between events are very hard to reinterpret without the audience noticing and crying "Foul!"

We all know that the Savior's declaration "Upon this rock I will build my church" *can* mean different things to different people. But if I tell you that the "so-called Good Samaritan" was really a clever businessman who acted as he did so as to impress the innkeeper in order to get a purchasing contract with him later, and if I tell you that Christ's message was that you must do good PR in order to succeed in business, you *know* I'm lying. Clear, simple stories persist unchanged, where doctrines can be changed and *have* been changed constantly.

Among all else that he was and is, Christ was and is a creator, an artist, a shaper. And the stories that he told, though they were only heard by a few thousand people [...] have become part of the collective memory of billions of people.

The Rest of the Proverb

Tell me a fact, and I'll learn.

Tell me a truth, and I'll believe.

Tell me a story, and it will live in my heart forever.