

SUNSHINE AND SHADE:

COMPLEMENTARY DIFFERENCES AND CREATIVE TENSIONS
IN A ONE-HEART COMMUNITY

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In most areas—from financial priorities (first, pay off the house) to the optimal thermostat setting (69°F) to the most engaging films (British period dramas, of course)—my wife and I are in perfect harmony. But one ongoing area of disagreement (literally) is our yard. I love aspen trees. Dawn thinks they are weeds. I like plenty of beds. She prefers more lawn. I want to set the basketball standard on the south side of the driveway. She fancies the north. For most of these garden-variety disagreements we have been able to establish workable compromises, such as the small but satisfying grove of aspen I cultivate in a remote corner of the yard. But one particular area, a seemingly innocuous patch of earth sandwiched between our patio and the back lawn, has created the greatest controversy because our visions for it are so completely incompatible.

Our patio lies immediately west of our back door, where it absorbs the full blaze of afternoon sunlight. Even on the mildest summer days, it can be unbearably bright and hot. Consequently, I want to dedicate a small portion of its adjoining soil for a tree, preferably something that would eventually spread a thick canopy of shade across the patio and back of the house, creating an outdoor space that is more compatible with human sociality or solitary reading. But shade, even a more delicate variety, would foil Dawn's purposes, because every year she plants our vegetable garden in that sun-drenched perimeter bed. Peas, carrots, beans, squash, onions, and tomatoes abundantly—and, I must admit, attractively—spill over the flagstones, where they can be conveniently weeded and harvested. So the last thing she wants is shade in the very place where I think we need it most, and the relatively small space I want for a tree she prefers to dedicate to parsley and spinach.

Sunshine and shade—both reasonable, positive values, and yet completely incompatible. Dawn and I both understand, even appreciate, the value of the other's position, but neither of us has been able to convince the other to switch priorities. And so this area of disagreement has stretched on, unresolved, for years. (Although due to our uncertain economy and the fact that a tree would decide the issue, the default decision has favored vegetables over human comfort; and in this respect Dawn has waged a successful war of attrition.)

But the fact that we even have this ongoing disagreement raises a crucial question: Where does this leave us in regard to Zion? At first glance, this may seem a silly question, but it addresses a spiritually crucial

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issue. Zion is defined as people who are of “one heart and one mind.”¹ While Dawn and I are of one heart in regards to our yard—we both want it beautiful and useable—we are not of one mind when it comes to this little patch of dirt. Does our disagreement—small, but deeply entrenched—disqualify us from Zion? Must this be resolved before we can become of “one heart and one mind?”

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This question is important because disagreements between honorable, Zion-striving people are bound to occur. Not just in minor things, like where to plant a tree, or what color to paint the bedroom, or which football team to support, but also in more substantial areas like political parties, economic philosophies, business decisions, or—in the case of our campus community—the appropriate way to establish and administer a high-quality, faith-centered education to as many people as possible. Good people, with righteous desires and pure intentions, may sooner or later find themselves on opposite sides of an issue, often with passionate convictions that their perspectives are right and the others wrong.

What then are we to do? When two virtuous individuals disagree on an issue, is one right and the other wrong? Must one automatically give in to the other? And how do we decide who will capitulate? Certainly one way Dawn and I could resolve our dilemma would be for me to invoke my responsibility to “preside” and make an executive decision (with a smile on my face and gentleness in my heart, of course). Such action might achieve *conformity* (or probably not, knowing Dawn) but it certainly would not foster *unity*, at least not the pure-hearted unity Zion requires and we both seek. We often mistake conformity for unity, but as Joseph Smith learned, “No power or influence can or ought to be maintained by virtue of the priesthood, only by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned.”² True Zion-like unity, it seems to me, can only be achieved through means other than authority-induced compliance that papers over differences of opinion. This leads me to look for different forms of engagement when disagreements and tensions arise.

DOES DISAGREEMENT EQUAL CONTENTION?

As Zion-striving individuals we seek consensus (as we should) and shun contention (also as we should). But in our desire to achieve the first and avoid the second we often surrender or retreat at the first sign of tension or disagreement because, as we have often read, “he that hath the spirit of contention is not of me, but is of the devil, who is the father of contention.” Still, are the concepts of *disagreement* and *contention* really synonymous? Note the full context of the above quote. It came as Jesus taught the Nephites the correct form of baptism:

And there shall be no disputations among you, as there have hitherto been; neither shall there be disputations among you concerning the points of my doctrine, as there have hitherto been. For verily, verily I say unto you, he that hath the spirit of contention is not of me, but is of the devil, who is the father of contention, and he stirreth up the hearts of men to contend with anger, one with another. Behold, this is not my doctrine, to stir up the hearts of men with anger, one against another; but this is my doctrine, that such things should be done away.³

These verses are instructive in a couple ways. At first glance, the Savior was resolving a question about a fundamental doctrine—baptism—and cautioning against further disputations. But what he seemed most concerned about was not necessarily that the Nephites had disagreed at all, but *how* they had disagreed. In this case, their differences seem to have allowed the devil to lead them to “anger, one against another.” And, as the Savior noted, eliciting rage or resentment is not His doctrine.

Contention, then, is not simply a difference of opinion, but rather disagreement coupled with anger. Is it possible to disagree without anger? Unfortunately, our popular and political cultures don’t provide many healthy role models. Anger towards those who disagree with our point of view is often reinforced by talk radio, television, and the Internet. Consequently, we learn to equate all differences with a spirit of contention, and so Zion-striving people often learn to retreat from most confrontations, automatically surrendering the field to more assertive personalities or higher authorities. (I learned this lesson so well, for example, that a faithful sister in my mission referred to me as Elder “Avoid Confrontation” Pulsipher.)

But consider another model—the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, leaders who are strong, talented, and, yes, even *diverse* in their points of view. They often disagree with each other, sometimes passionately, and they are no shrinking violets. I remember an apostle once sharing with the faculty at BYU–Idaho that when he attended his first meeting with the Twelve he was surprised at the forcefulness of the discussion. After he sat quietly for some time, another apostle passed him a note that read, “Welcome to the Quorum of the Twelve. Here we play hardball.” The moral of this anecdote is not that disagreement is good or desirable, but that *disagreement* is not necessarily *contention*.

What then makes the difference? It seems to be the *spirit* in which such disagreements are approached. When a disagreement is approached in a spirit of anger or malice, it is *contention*. But when a disagreement is approached in a spirit of *love*—which modern revelation requires of the presiding quorums, like the Quorum of the Twelve⁴—it has the potential to create a dynamic creativity that can solve problems and enhance society. Consequently, “contention” might be defined as “disagreement with

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enmity,” while a Zion-like approach is “disagreement with love.” With that in mind, note this description of Zion as found in the Fourth Book of Nephi: “And it came to pass that there was no contention in the land, because of the love of God which did dwell in the hearts of the people.”⁵ Thus the *presence* of love—rather than an *absence* of disagreement—may be the key to eliminating contention.

COMPLEMENTARY & ADVERSARIAL DIFFERENCES

God, after all, seems to value diversity, even tension. We see it all around us—in our families, in our neighborhoods, in the natural world, in music, in art, in science. Diversity and tension are unavoidable. Must all these differences be resolved before Zion can be achieved? Must everyone belong to the same political party or subscribe to the same economic philosophy or have exactly the same vision for our campus community in order for Zion to be achieved? Must we all think and feel the same to become “of one heart and one mind?”

Probably not, because when God set up this world he clearly created variety—and opposition. A fundamental characteristic of his creation is that it was *divided*—light and darkness, water and dry land, day and night, male and female. And God declared “it was good.”⁶ Such differences might be called *complementary*. Both sides are “good.” Neither is “bad.” And yet they are not entirely compatible nor without a key element of tension. We cannot simultaneously experience the full light of day and the dark pitch of night. The sea cannot also be dry land. And anyone who has experienced the mystery of male-female relationships knows how profoundly different—even incompatible—the two sexes can be. Nevertheless, the tensions within these differences can be a source of incredible *creativity*—in the fullest sense of the word. Brilliant palettes of color are revealed at the edge of day and night. The force of energy between sand and wave or river and rock creates some of our most sublime landscapes of coasts and canyons. And with the presence of love—deep, abiding, and true—sexual differences and gendered tensions can both create life and enrich the collective capacities of men and women.

Of course, not all differences and tensions are complementary and creative. There are others—good and evil, heaven and hell, virtue and vice—which are *adversarial*. God’s original pure creation teemed with complementary differences, but Satan soon drew God’s children into the adversarial variety when he tempted man and woman with the forbidden fruit, that they might “know good and evil.”⁷ Experiencing adversarial differences is a key element of mortality, tasting the bitter that we might learn to prize the good.⁸ But unlike complementary differences, adversarial ones embody higher and lower values—true distinctions between right and wrong. Thus, an adversarial concept of opposition is

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central to defining righteousness, sin, even the atonement, and is essential to developing moral character.

But a major challenge for us—as Latter-day Saints and as a faculty—is to accurately distinguish differences that are adversarial from those that are creatively complementary. In other words, another aspect of our mortal education is to not only learn to discern between good and evil, but to learn to recognize when we should characterize the other side of a tension as wrong (and consequently of lesser value) and when we need to define it as simply different (but perhaps equally valid). Learning to make this distinction is crucial, because when we can accurately separate the two, we can harness the creative power of the complementary differences rather than mistakenly wage war against a misperceived “error” or “enemy.”

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Making the distinction, of course, is not always easy. Our world is awash with various differences and tensions, and whenever we find ourselves on one side of a tension, we have a natural human tendency to identify with those who agree with us—our “team”—and to perceive the tension in purely oppositional terms—with our side as “right,” of course, and other side as “wrong.” This happens constantly in politics, with various factions lining up on various issues which can often be reduced to a tension between *freedom* and *order*. Which is more important? Well... neither. Freedom without order is anarchy, and order without freedom is bondage. Both have value, each needs the other, and the “right” position is usually found in the creative tension between the two, as our society and its political discourse swing between too much of one or too much of the other. They form a complementary difference, but that hasn’t kept people on one side or the other of various issues—from healthcare reform to counter-terrorism efforts to immigration debates—from characterizing the tension in purely adversarial terms.

Similar types of tensions exist in a university community: Is a college education primarily *intellectual* or *vocational*? Which is more important, the *quality* of instruction or the *efficiency* of delivery? And—unique to campuses like ours—is the university primarily an *academic* or an *ecclesiastical* institution? Faculty and administration—because of their respective stewardships and attendant perspectives—often find themselves emphasizing or favoring different sides of these tensions. Which is more important? In most cases, neither. Both values are usually crucial to fulfilling the purposes of a modern university, and so differences between faculty and administrative priorities are most often complementary rather than adversarial, although for many people—faculty members and administrators alike—the tension may *feel* adversarial, because the tension is *real*. To move in one direction means sacrificing elements of the other. If not, there wouldn’t be tension. And it can be difficult for people

in the heat of struggle to accurately identify the tension's complementary characteristics and creative potential.

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Consequently, one key to identifying a complementary difference is to step back and note that when both sides of a complementary tension are combined they typically create a *whole* rather than an *opposition*. Male and female, joined together, form a whole, and neither is better than the other. (On the other hand, good and evil, joined together, do not form a whole. They do need each other, in a sense, since their oppositional natures help to define one another, but one is clearly better.) Once a complementary difference is accurately identified, it becomes easier to initiate attitudes and approaches that will unleash the tension's creative energy. But should a complementary difference be mischaracterized as adversarial, it is easy for one or both sides to attribute malice, disloyalty, or incompetence to the other. Moreover, people can unintentionally become like Laman and Lemuel, mistaking truth—even inspired, loving truth—for anger.⁹

INSPIRED TENSIONS IN LOVING DIALOGUE

As we step back from our emotional investment in defending a particular position, and perceive the opposing side as having something with potential value—even if we still hold to our own position—it is easier for us to love a person with whom we are in tension. Likewise, as we develop greater love for others, we are more apt to recognize the value of their positions, even if they disagree with us. Accordingly, we make creative engagement more likely and more fully partake of the divine nature—“For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye?”¹⁰ We develop this pure love by praying “with all the energy of heart” that we “may be filled” with it, then by serving those with whom we disagree—the greatest and fastest way to develop godly love.¹¹ And one way we serve—among others—is by engaging our opponents in loving dialogue.

As we charitably engage those with whom we disagree, surprising things begin to happen. One of the most remarkable is that we may learn that others feel as deeply inspired in their positions as we feel in ours. I first noticed this several years past, when I was serving as a counselor in a bishopric. The other counselor and I usually agreed in our advice. But sometimes, as I tried to listen to the Spirit, I found that the advice I gave was nearly opposite to the advice proffered by the other counselor. Was one of us out of touch with the Spirit? That was certainly possible. But as we compared notes on such occasions—since we loved each other and deeply respected the other's desire to follow the Spirit—we discovered that while we both seemed to have righteous desires and were living worthy to receive them, we sometimes seemed to receive different messages from

God. This puzzled me for a time, until I considered that by giving nearly opposite counsel to the bishop, we were helping him to see certain issues more clearly and to make better decisions. I highlighted certain issues. The second counselor highlighted others. Sometimes the bishop decided one way, sometimes the other, sometimes he found a compromise between the two, and sometimes a new option emerged from our deliberations. Regardless of the outcome, the seemingly contradictory spiritual signals were invaluable to his process of discernment and righteous judgment. They brought *wholeness* to the discussion.

Later, while serving as a stake executive secretary, I saw the same process at work in a high council. A certain high councilor, whom I knew to earnestly seek the Spirit, frequently questioned the stake president's basic assumptions before (and even after) decisions were proposed. Once a decision was firmly determined, this high councilor was always fully supportive, but his challenges often created a bit of tension in the council. Sometime later, after he had moved on to other callings, the stake president told him how much he missed his input. "You didn't always tell me things I wanted to hear," the stake president said. "But you always told me what I needed to hear." This faithful high councilor had been inspired to challenge certain assumptions to help the stake leaders make appropriate and better informed decisions.

This high councilor was unusual—although not singular—and part of the discomfort he caused came from the fact that questioning people in authority—even lovingly—is unusual in Mormon culture. Our deep and appropriate respect for vertical lines of authority means that many if not most Latter-day Saints suppress their opinions if they feel they disagree with their file leaders, even when they sense that their views are spiritually inspired. Speaking a difference requires initiating a dialogue, and hierarchies are not naturally inclined to the dynamics of dialogue—even loving dialogue—because true dialogue necessarily involves negotiation and compromise, two processes we do not normally associate with hierarchies, including the Kingdom of God. But some of our cultural assumptions about dialogue and God may be wrong.

For example, we often hear the adage, "When God speaks, discussion ends." And yet the scriptures provide several examples in which righteous individuals openly questioned a divine decision and negotiated a different outcome: Abraham pled for the fate of the righteous remnant in Sodom and Gomorrah, Moses successfully deflected the destruction of his fellow Israelites, the servant in the vineyard convinced the Master to spare it "a little longer," and the Brother of Jared mitigated the punishments of Babel.¹² From these examples, the Lord appears more open to dialogue, negotiation, and compromise than we tend to assume. After all, he invites us to "reason together."¹³ The key, of course, is that each of these

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individuals questioned the decision and negotiated a different outcome in a spirit of love and loyalty. Still, it must have taken a remarkable amount of courage—and trust—to challenge the Lord’s decision and suggest an alternative course.

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In the face of our complementary differences and as we struggle with our creative tensions, this type of courage is exactly what we need most—the courage to speak in love and listen when others question us in love. The essential balance is to act, to trust, to engage our disagreements rather than avoid them. Love is the key ingredient for the dialogue, but it is also the key to finding the courage to speak in the first place, for “perfect love casteth out fear.”¹⁴ And as we pray for and develop this love in our lives we will develop and model the courage of loving disagreement in our families, quorums, and campus. We will recognize in everyone a common divinity, even—and especially—in those with whom we passionately disagree. Listening in humility and love will help us focus on *what* is right rather than *who* is right, and help transform our differences into dynamic creativity that can lead us to appropriate accommodations and inspired solutions.

The advantage of recognizing—even encouraging—complementary differences and creative tensions is that the inspired solutions that result will more likely embody an appropriate balance between the two positive values that constitute the tension—freedom and order, male and female, quality and efficiency, or whatever the values might be. If we listen only to those who agree with us—if we love only those who love us—we become insulated and list too far to one side of the tension, creating imbalance and unnecessary difficulties for any endeavor. True balance embraces and tries to lovingly accommodate both sides of every complementary difference, harnessing the energy of each creative tension. It is *wholeness*. It is Zion. Perhaps being “of one heart and one mind” does not mean a community in which everyone feels and thinks the same, but rather is better characterized as having “hearts knit together in unity and love.”¹⁵ After all, the origin of the verb *knit* is *to knot*—to join together two *separate* strands that never lose their individuality—their difference—even as they bend around, support, and complement each other in a dynamic whole, suspended in perpetual tension against one another.

Consequently, there may yet be some attainable accommodation regarding the small “area of disagreement” between Dawn and me. We’ve already sensed some of the possibilities. Last summer I found a tiny maple growing in my little aspen grove, and with Dawn’s permission I planted it near the patio. It currently has only four leaves and the bean plants nearly smothered it all summer. But so far it has survived. The seedling hasn’t necessarily solved or erased our different priorities regarding sunshine and shade. I don’t even know if the young thing will make it through

the winter. Still, should it flourish and its shade begin to interfere with the vegetables, I may choose to cut it down or move it to another part of the yard, because I love Dawn and want her to have the comfort of her garden. But the fact that she agreed to this experiment in shade—in fact, even suggested it—I recognize as a token of her love for me. ☺

NOTES

- 1 Moses 7:18.
- 2 Doctrine and Covenants 121:39-41.
- 3 3 Nephi 11:21-30.
- 4 Doctrine and Covenants 107:30-31.
- 5 4 Nephi 1:15-17.
- 6 See Genesis 1, Moses 2, and Abraham 4 and 5.
- 7 See Genesis 3:1-5 and Moses 4:1-11.
- 8 Moses 6:55.
- 9 See 2 Nephi 1:26.
- 10 Matthew 5:46. Note that this comes immediately before the injunction to “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect” (verse 48), implying that an ability to love those who oppose us may be the culminating divine trait which allows us to achieve “perfectness” or “wholeness.”
- 11 Moroni 7:48.
- 12 See Genesis 18:16-33, Exodus 7:7-14, Jacob 5:49-51, and Ether 1:33-43.
- 13 Isaiah 1:18.
- 14 1 John 4:18.
- 15 Mosiah 18:21. See also Colossians 2:2.