

THE SPIRIT OF ADULTERY:
STUDENTS AND THE DANGERS OF ABUNDANCE

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The scriptures, especially the *Book of Mormon*, have consistently attached the blessings of prosperity to the dangers of pride. It is a steady message that should make us want to sit up and pay attention, a message probably worthy of more than we give it in return—especially now, for we live, and our students have been raised, in the most prosperous period in world history. In our current national abundance we have so much stuff that our homes can't grow fast enough to contain it. Since 1970, commercial storage space in the U.S. has mushroomed at *one hundred times* the rate of population growth (witness all the storage units along most highways). Living space has doubled even as family size decreased by one third, and we still don't have enough room. What this means is that families are made up of more stuff and fewer people. That's the recipe of pride, of which the Lord has frequently warned his people.

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And if ye seek the riches which it is the will of the Father to give unto you, ye shall be the richest of all people, for ye shall have the riches of eternity; and it must needs be that the riches of the earth are mine to give; but beware of pride, lest ye become as the Nephites of old. (*Doctrine & Covenants* 38:39)

Years ago President Spencer W. Kimball invited social scientists to take a serious look at the *Book of Mormon*: “The student of society will find in this unusual book the disintegration of nations through pride, soft living, and luxuries, terminating finally in hunger and fetters” (*Faith Precedes the Miracle*, 331). As a social scientist, I have accepted this invitation, and over the last several years I have engaged students in a conversation about issues of abundance, pride, and immorality. The more I've conversed, the more I realize how powerful the *Book of Mormon* must be in addressing and identifying many of the dangerous issues which confront our students in their prosperity. What follows is a discussion of the perverse nature of the principles operating in our current consumer climate, a description of the challenge this climate presents to our students (and to us), and a suggestion of how the *Book of Mormon* might help us engage students in a discussion about these issues.

INVERTING THE LAW OF THE HARVEST

Throughout history, the Law of the Harvest has been a foundational precept of any civilization. The formative message for most citizens (the wealthy minority excepted) has been one of “front-loading” or delayed

gratification—“hold on there young fellow, work hard and you’ll be rewarded down the road”—pay now, buy later. Starting a career and raising a family have always been tremendously “front loaded” processes. Young children can essentially “raise” good parents by forcing them into a train of unselfish, long-term thinking that even extends beyond their own lives. This is good and right, but in our current prosperity the Law of the Harvest is being challenged and inverted.

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We now live in an age of such abundance that ordinary folks can live in a way that was once exclusive to a pampered elite. Historically these privileged ones hovered above everyone else’s norms and their lifestyles were synonymous with decadence, debauchery, degeneration, and decline. Organized gambling, easy credit, packaged leisure and pleasure, were only some of the defining privileges and curses of the elite. Not surprisingly, as these vices piled up they provided the themes for the cautionary wisdom of great literature and passion plays, especially the Devil’s Pact or Faustian bargain. You know the racket: the Devil will “Fed Ex” whatever you want, under the oh-so-far-away condition that he get your soul some time over the horizon. In *Damn Yankees*, perhaps a more familiar, updated version of the diabolical deal, a middle-aged baseball fan sells his soul to Mr. Applegate (the Devil) for the chance to play for the Washington Senators, which he soon leads in both hitting and pitching. This “back-loaded” buy now, pay later philosophy is an Inverse Law of the Harvest—perhaps the credit card Law of the Plastic—and I’m convinced it is literally Satanic. Another, better Faust has tried to warn us about elements of the original Faustian bargain:

We must be careful of the misuse of credit. The use of credit cards in many places has increased consumer debt to staggering proportions... Contemporary society rushes headlong to accumulate the material goods of this world. This leads many to think they can alter the law of the harvest, reaping rewards without paying the price of honest toil and effort. (Elder James E. Faust, *Conference Report*, April 1998)

Our unprecedented capacity to “feed the need”—as one prominent advertisement encourages—to instantly gratify, through this Inverse Law of the Harvest, is perhaps Satan’s most insidiously vaporous weapon. It drifts in and covers us. It is the “flaxen cord” he employs to bind us (2 Nephi 26:2). It is as ordinary as financing a family car, boat, RV, or vacation because everyone else is doing it. It has no “R” rating, and yet the pure principles it violates are at the heart of all immorality in the way we “gratify our pride, our vain ambition” (*Doctrine & Covenants* 121:37). President Gordon B. Hinckley has warned us about embracing an Inverse Law of the Harvest, acknowledging how seductive this thought trail can be:

So many of our people are living on the very edge of their incomes. In fact, some are living on borrowings. In the U.S., the credit crisis has led to skyrocketing bankruptcies that reached more than 1.35 million last year—(20% more than were graduated from college) up 50 percent from 1992... We are beguiled by seductive advertising. Television carries the enticing invitation to borrow up to 125 percent of the value of one's home, but no mention is made of interest. (*Conference Report*, October 1998)

What is going to happen to a family in its indebtedness when the economic cycle invariably turns down? Then conditions will be ripe for the Adversary to wreak his havoc on the family, because the Inverse Law of the Harvest often leads people's relationship to *things* to define their relationship to *people*, especially in the family. From conversations with marriage counselors, bishops and stake presidents, I have learned that the majority of family breakups have financial disagreements at their core. Almost the first diagnostic question they ask couples is whether they can discuss finances without getting angry. If and when the more telling sexual problems arise they are usually a by-product of financial stress and/or selfish behavior brought on by an Inverse Law of the Harvest.

Perhaps the Savior's slashing phrase, "a wicked and adulterous generation that seeks for a sign" (Matthew 16:4, Mark 8:12), points to any generation that subscribes to the Inverse Law of the Harvest—*maximum benefits for minimum responsibility*. While the Savior was addressing a group of crafty Pharisees with no intention of exercising faith before the miracle, the characterization applies equally to *any irresponsibility*. This "Spirit of Adultery" is more seductive than "mere" sexual immorality because it is so vanilla, so Main Street. In plain clothes it become Satan's principle of choice in promoting the selfishness that is his essence—his primary weapon in cutting us off from our Creator and our progression through responsibility and accountability.

A culture based on an Inverted Law of the Harvest or Spirit of Adultery can create what Glen Stanton, a social research analyst for *Focus on the Family*, identifies as a climate of perverse consumerism. It strains all life through the bars of a dollar sign, quickly leading "people [to] treat one another like products. In such an environment, husbands and wives may feel justified when they decide to trade in a spouse for a 'new and improved' version" (<http://www.pbs.org/kcts/affluenza/show/stanton.html>).

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THE CHALLENGE TO OUR STUDENTS

This Inverted Law of the Harvest/Spirit of Adultery dominates the environment in which our students are growing up, and in many cases such skewed values are taught at home. One of the most blatant examples was a student whose college "survival kit," supplied by her

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generous parents, included a \$65,000 Mercedes Benz sports car. What future husband will be able “feed her need” at the outset of their marriage? By most accounts we probably are enjoying the most doctrinally drilled and dedicated students ever at Ricks, who nevertheless suffer from a dangerous disengagement from the Law of the Harvest. A typical example of this disconnect is a returned missionary and Elder’s Quorum President who, when he couldn’t make his rent payments, asked his Bishop for assistance. After talking to the apartment manager, the disconnect was clear to the Bishop. Yes, this pleasant kid was fulfilling his assignments, reported the manager, and so he had already cut him slack on four months rent. But in good conscience he could do no more. The last straw was when the manager discovered the student had flown to New York to visit a friend over a long weekend.

This student’s behavior is emblematic of the stealth with which our society conspires to invert the Law of the Harvest. I’m sure the student felt entitled to fly to New York, because many of his friends did. It’s also natural for many students to feel entitled to certain amenities in their apartments, which has become a kind of high tech status race in Rexburg, creating a caste system among housing complexes.

Even those who don’t feel entitled directly feel so indirectly, with potentially even more serious consequences. An apartment manager reminded me of an unfortunate, yet all too familiar, pattern of desperate and dangerous behavior by some of the less wealthy women in her “middle caste” housing complex. The young women convinced themselves that with fewer cars and clothes than their wealthier sisters, they were less attractive to the young men. They made up for it by being more attentive and available to the young men in the one area where we necessarily draw the line. Almost twenty years ago, Bruce Hafen (then Ricks President and now member of the First Quorum of the Seventy) described the insidious rationalization of this behavior:

The discouragement that many feel as another empty Friday night rolls by is often a form of insecurity we all encounter as we seek to find ourselves. Without social approval, we may begin to doubt whether our life is really worthwhile. We may, mistakenly, seek the symbols of success—whether that is being popular or rich or being famous within our own sphere. We may let someone take improper liberties with us, indulge ourselves in some practice that seems to bring temporary relief, or even make poor marriage choices just to show that *somebody* will have us. (*BYU Today*, December 1982, 37)

Obviously the young men at Ricks reciprocally feed this process. If a recent report of a returned missionary is even remotely representative of an attitude on campus, then the Satanic process of turning people into products to be consumed is more pernicious than we’d like to think.

To “Jed,” women at Ricks are an “investment.” “When you put money into something you expect something good in return. With interest! If we don’t feel that we can get that, we don’t invest, we just forget it and move on to something better” (Ellen Pearson, *New Perspectives*, Spring 1999, 9). We increasingly live in a moral consumer climate that permits “Jed” to express a human relationship as a customer with a money-back guarantee. A recent classroom experience suggests multiple Jeds are on the prowl.

One day in class I asked students if they were familiar with a concept I heard on the radio—*Friends with Benefits*. In this mutual “feed the need” arrangement both partners agree to live together without any obligations, essentially consuming each other as disposable sexual products. Quickly a student told me the Ricks Standards compliant version is NCMO (pronounced “nickmo” for *Non-Committal Make-Out*). Never in my seven years at Ricks have I been able to so thoroughly throw the switch as the moment when the concept of NCMO jolted every student upright with eyes focused on me. The bristling amperage in that experience convinced me every student has come to terms with NCMO in one way or another.

NCMO’s and Jeds are the “maximized benefits for minimal responsibility” quintessence of the Spirit of Adultery most conspicuously in action. But it is the activity below the radar screen that should concern us. Chastity violations are like the canaries-in-the-cage which miners used as pre-electronic toxin detectors. By the time the law of chastity is broken, the more elemental parts of the Spirit of Adultery have already escaped. In addressing what we conveniently term the Decline in Morals issue at Ricks, we are in effect trying to resuscitate the canary in the cage when we really ought to be “sourcing” the toxins of a deeper immorality. Don’t get me wrong, sexual violations are always serious and deserve immediate triage. But they are a comparatively distinct set of almost clinical concerns. The much more pervasive Spirit of Adultery—benefits without responsibility—is the real health risk.

I believe we do the students a disservice and provide them with a false sense of security as they plan for marriage and families when we take the easy route and tell them they are “the chosen generation” (presumably as a self-esteem builder, a sort of pre-temple protection against the things of the world), doing battle with the forces of the Adversary and everything he can throw at them. Yes, sexual immorality is the single most powerful weapon in his arsenal, and by obeying the law of chastity we are shielding ourselves against the biggest single arrow in his quiver. Yet we seem to do very little to consciously alert students about other fiery darts he arrays in much greater numbers through consumer immorality. The Spirit of Adultery precedes sexual adultery. Recall that

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best estimates have ninety percent of divorces with finances, not infidelity, at their heart. Students who come into marriage sexually moral but consumer immoral are condemned to a rude awakening.

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By allowing the Law of Chastity, and to a lesser extent dress codes, to effectively dominate our concerns about moral decline, we are playing on the Adversary's terms. The last thing he wants is for us to *converse* with students and help *convert* them with core principles. He'd like nothing more than for us to tinker with the symptoms because on that basis we can never win. We play right into his hands when we seem to tell students "delay gratification sexually but with consumer gratification you're on your own." And then we wonder why we keep dealing with curfew and dress code violations.

ENGAGING STUDENTS IN A BOOK OF MORMON CONVERSATION

What is to be done? How do we help students fight an Inverted Law of the Harvest and its attendant Spirit of Adultery. Banning big ticket "survival kits" and going into an Amish mode is hardly the answer. Students need a guide for life after Ricks—principles that travel anywhere—and the *Book of Mormon* provides a grand diagnostic tool for identifying declining morality. The potential for the *Book of Mormon* to intrinsically speak to our students on a gut level is incomparable. It is their book even more than ours—they are entering a world more abundant than ours has been—and it is becoming more relevant by the tick of the second. It therefore can and must be more "real" to them than it was for us. The sheer abundance and attendant expectations—"feed the need," "the customer is always right," "you want it, you got it," "when others say 'no,' we say 'yes'"—gives expression to an Inverted Law of the Harvest and enslaving Spirit of Adultery as in no other time, and the *Book of Mormon* exposes and explains these concepts as no other book does. In just one of countless examples, Elder Dallin H. Oaks points out a great lesson of consumer pride and immorality in one of Alma's sermons:

Alma told the people that if they were not "stripped of pride" they were "not prepared to meet God" or to have "eternal life" (Alma 5:28). He condemned those who were "puffed up" in the "vain things of the world" and "in the pride of [their] hearts" (Alma 5:37, 53). He asked: "Will ye still persist in the wearing of costly apparel and setting your hearts upon the vain things of the world...? Yea, will ye persist in supposing that ye are better one than another; Yea, will ye persist in the persecution of your brethren?" (Alma 5:53-54). The pride of comparison seems to have a strong tendency toward persecution (*Pure in Heart*, 10).

This "pride of comparison," with the costly and vain props of pride, is very real to our students, who are constantly comparing their

possessions—apartments, cars, clothes, girlfriends/boyfriends—with each other. Can we point out to them, as has Hugh Nibley to us, that the lesson of the *Book of Mormon* for righteous members is to avoid becoming self-righteous, consumer-enabled, pride-soaked Zoramites: “We must not forget those *Book of Mormon* super-good guys, the Zoramites—hard working, independent, fiercely patriotic, brave, smart, prosperous Zoramites—strictly attending their meetings and observing proper dress standards. What a perfectly wonderful self-image!” (*Collected Works of Hugh Nibley*, Vol. 8, 488).

The *Book of Mormon* is not only effective at diagnosing consumer immorality and pride, but it also provides excellent examples for treating the disease. When approaching his son Corianton, Alma addressed an issue larger and deeper than Corianton’s conspicuous sexual crime. It is clear that Corianton’s sexual sin was part of a more comprehensive “Spirit of Adultery” pride package. First, Alma noted, Corianton proudly “boasted in [his] strength and [his] wisdom.” Only then did he break his covenant when he “did forsake the ministry” and went “after the harlot Isabel.” That Alma sees his son’s sins as a broad syndrome, rather than as an isolated weakness, is clear in his denunciation *in toto* of all “these things” (not one sexual thing) as “an abomination... above all sins save it be the shedding of innocent blood or denying the Holy Ghost” (Alma 39:2-5). Alma sees his son’s sins as an aggregate, which is reflected in his repentance regimen. After admonishing his son to “go no more after the lusts of [his] eyes,” Alma reminds him of the most active ingredients of the Spirit of Adultery to “cross himself” against. He should not be “led away by any vain and foolish thing” or “wicked harlots.” In Alma’s concluding advice it is clear that pride (not sexual sin) is the most communicable bacillus, for he places Corianton’s sexual sin within a corrosive cocktail of pernicious acquisitive and consumer immorality. “Seek not after riches nor the vain things of this world... you cannot carry them with you”(v. 14).

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Through this interchange with Corianton, Alma models a great teacher/student relationship—and the lesson was obviously received, given Corianton’s subsequent behavior—but I worry that by not seeking to develop the mature wisdom and charity of Alma, which will enable us to converse more directly with students and educate their hearts (and ours), we are by default raising a “chosen” generation of Ricks Zoramites—hard working, independent, fiercely patriotic, brave, smart, prosperous, strictly attending their meetings and observing proper dress standards. I fear that by not consciously engaging in the process of conversation with an eye towards repentance/learning/conversion, we are by default playing into Satan’s Spirit of Adultery, from which it is so difficult to detach ourselves in our contemporary climate of abundance.

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There are no wholesale ways of engaging students in true conversation/conversion—it can only be done on a case-by-case basis, one student at time, or as President Bednar has said, “one by one.” Certainly there are student-inspired “Hold to the Rod” initiatives which could include a contemporary presentation of the familiar *Book of Mormon* pride-cycle. Some of my students have suggested producing a feature length video or theatre production which could address the same issues in a way similar to an award-winning Redmond High School student production, *Barbie Get Real* (see <http://www.pbs.org/kcts/affluenzalshow/barbie2.html>).

Every academic discipline has its own set of concerns, its own unique currency and literacy. Each one presents an opportunity to raise contemporary ethical predicaments that bump up against the experience of the *Book of Mormon*. Each offers opportunities to reinforce the commitment to build the kingdom and establish righteousness because every discipline deals with human relationships in one way or another.

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Perhaps what we need first is to learn the art of conversation, because it is often already neglected at home (see “Family Table Talk,” *Ensign* September 1998, 24-27). In a beautifully written book, Gina Bria, a Columbia University anthropologist, a practicing Jew, and once a stay-at-home mother of four, describes many of the thoughtful rituals she created to promote an everyday spirituality on the family’s, not the world’s, terms. She summarizes:

While we want to make our homes a haven, a sanctuary, we also have to make them more than just a rest from the world. They must serve as a place to discuss the world, to critique and assess. Homes need to be the seat of judgment, where we decide together what is good and bad, right or wrong, purposeful or lost. This doesn’t mean we pack with action but with meaningful, relationships, conversation and rootedness. (*The Art of Family*, 175)

There’s something here for Ricks, the first home-away-from-home for most students. What are we doing to promote Ricks as a “seat of judgment, where we decide together what is good and bad, right or wrong, purposeful or lost?” Do we help “critique and assess” our consumer culture? Or do we attempt to “pack with action” something that should offer more “meaningful relationships, conversation and rootedness?” Do we help promote conversations about concepts such as honesty, moral purity, charity, service or civic responsibility? Again, the *Book of Mormon* provides many rich examples of these concepts that we can bring to this conversation.

Maybe we need to simply know how serious this conversation is because another one is already in progress. Our students are in the thick of a high stakes \$150 billion-per-year teenager consumer market, the largest ever. A recent PBS documentary, “Merchants of Cool,” discloses

how cold and calculating the targeting of young people by marketers is. They do everything within their power to package the necessity of a hip, cool, consumable, lifestyle to insecure students. And it seems so real, so inevitable. Teach them brand loyalty when they are yet in their youth and they will not stray far from the path in their old age. We are so much part of an abundance driven consumer world it is difficult to distance ourselves from its ubiquity. To paraphrase one media critic, “I don’t know who discovered water, but I’m sure it wasn’t a fish.”

I am trying to engage my students in a conversation about the consumer saturated world in which they are awash, even as I struggle to understand the *Book of Mormon* lessons about abundance, pride and immorality for myself. If you really converse, they will come. I consistently find the best experiences in the random drop-by-the-office times when students mostly seek confirmation of their own best Law of the Harvest instincts. In those moments I learn to converse in such a way that my heart and my students’ hearts “are honest, and are broken, and spirits contrite and are willing to observe covenants by sacrifice” (*Doctrine and Covenants* 97:8-9)—the kind of Law of the Harvest/Sacrifice upon which the Kingdom of God rests. In the end I can only hope students will listen to the Lord’s promise and “be led in the paths where the poisonous serpents cannot lay hold” upon their heels, and that they will “mount up in the imagination of [their] thoughts as upon eagle’s wings” (*Doctrine and Covenants* 124: 99). ∞

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