

TEACHING TRUE

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Michael Farnworth's thoughtful letter contains two huge questions: "What is truth?" and "Are we going to teach ourselves to read beyond the superficial, specifically to understand that scriptural truth is multi-layered and involves, near its core, reconciling man to God and man to man?" Mike's message is about the second question and I agree to its importance, affirming that we should think about it and write about it, that it must underlie our thoughts and our deeds. But I took my cue from Mike's first question to ask some of our colleagues to write about truth. Their articles follow this one.

The reason why our campus discourse could profitably include Truth as a topic, beyond our individual needs, is our students' need. For me, one of the great questions has been: What justifies the existence of this college? Having known CES only through the Institute program and as a tithe payer before coming to Ricks, I do not find the question rhetorical. Unless we perceive and teach truth in uncommon ways, I do not find the justification. All this is spelled out in our mission statement, but actually getting it done, and getting it done within an academic discipline, are two opportunities only partially realized.

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I will write about truth as it is known, about reasoning upon truth, obtaining truth, teaching truth, and testimony. My undertaking is too ambitious, as my understanding is not large. But I want to preface the following articles and outline parts of a conversation that I hope will ensue, which could impel us to deeper understanding, to sharper perceptions of our task, and to increased power for accomplishing it. Mike, you have my permission to not read the second section following, on reasoning, but by the end you may find your two questions blending back into one.

(NOT) TRUTH AS IT IS KNOWN

"There is no truth with a capital 't,'" announced the professor; I will explain how right she was. I was an eager student in a university English class, and it was just a couple of years ago. The reasoning ran: since there is no God there is no truth; since there is no truth there is no meaning; since no meaning, no purpose; since no purpose, we must make one; a purpose needs a principle; we'll have to make our own principle as well since none is given (It's a tough job, but somebody has to do it—and who better than us'n?); a principle has got to reflect truth; ergo, our truth will be a socially negotiated construct. Oh, and by

the way, since I (proffered the professor) have a socio-political agenda, within it we will find our topic of discussion and our truth. The agenda turned out to be of the variety called “liberal,” yet I felt anything but liberated by the argument.

Because of the inductive fallacy, that the exception to the rule is just waiting to happen, I concede that the scientific method does not lead to Truth. And because deductive reasoning begins from inductive conclusions, I concede that syllogisms do not lead to Truth. There—in two sentences I have discounted logical thought as a pathway to Truth. We are now ready to see that sophic knowledge—that which is empirical and that which is rational—contains no certainty. The professor was right: there is no truth with a capital “t” at the sophic end of the rainbow. Truth being independent to act for itself (otherwise there is no existence), I was witnessing an acting out of the opposite principle, arriving at a state of nonexistence ironically called existentialism.

So we know why the world is in despair. Physicists in pursuit of elemental physical forms discover matter to be massless, immaterial. Having committed itself to science for a sense of certainty, our culture is in danger of disappearing because each ripple leads to the next ripple of uncertainty. Remember the *Weekly Reader* in second grade? (This was in the euphoric 1950’s; few of you will remember.) Fifty cents paid the annual subscription. The recurring text was, “Scientists are working hard to solve this [or the other] problem.” Some makeshift solutions and some tentative answers have appeared. We travel, we consume, we compute, we have grown rich. We prefer living in our technological time to any previous time; but science has not produced meaning, our times are anything but certain, and most of our brothers and sisters do not share in the golden dream. How did we get into such a fix?

COME, LET US REASON TOGETHER (ABOUT TRUTH)

I respect the rationalist Descartes’ intellectual agility, but perhaps he got off on the wrong pineal gland with *cogito, ergo sum*—I think, therefore I am. His own existence was his first proof, his second the existence of God, followed by the existence of the universe. However the universe is not malleable in the forge of philosophy, and God cannot depend upon man for existence, as shown by the empiricist Hume—the *cogito* proof itself withers before empiricism because the clearest and most distinct ideas will not register on an empirical scale.

Even rationalists have not rationalized the Cartesian Circle: that God must exist because of our clear and distinct idea of Him, but that the idea’s clarity is guaranteed by God. Nor is the Cartesian Compromise, that mind and body meet in the pineal gland, a satisfactory explanation

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of the inconsistent tetrad in the mind-body problem, which sets out four clear and distinct truths that cannot coexist:

- The body is extended (material) substance.
- The mind is thinking (immaterial) substance.
- Material and immaterial substances cannot interact.
- The mind and the body interact.

In a philosophy class, we students were invited to prove one of the statements false, thus permitting consistency. For a Latter-day Saint working from the scriptures, this is not difficult, but for the empiricists among whom we live, or if we work within their paradigms, the most arguable proposition is the existence of spirit.

Empiricists assert a monadic existence, and so evade the problems of dualism. But if mind consists of electro-chemical action among neurons, where does the will reside, where do ideas come from, and how do they leap from mind to mind? We can't even account for color because subatomic particles, presuming that they reflect light (whatever light is), being of consistent color should reflect it consistently, so agglomerations of particles should also reflect it consistently.

Enlightenment had progressed to such a point in Kant's time that he could only give up on the issue of a knowable metaphysics. He concluded that metaphysics, knowledge that lies beyond experience, did not yet exist, that it probably could not exist, and that if it could exist its props would have to be set in place *a priori*. After all, what we get from our senses is strictly intuitive but our thinking is necessarily conceptual, and since the two cannot touch each other we cannot know nature, much less metaphysics. He concludes that God is inscrutable and calls for an end to dogmatic twaddle.

The rule of our philosophy seems to be that the more that is attempted the less remains, as if the purpose were to chop turf from the bog until the last bit is gone. Reason shrinks before the necessity to bring back into being one firm *a priori* patch on which to stand. Since nothing can be known, we eventually ask, "What do philosophy teachers teach?" Since nothing can be shown to exist, you can even ask, "What do physics teachers teach?" We see how fascinating all this is, but clearly it is not arriving at Truth. It leads to stronger, more flexible brains, as gymnastics lead to bodily flexibility and strength. But the cows come home to roost in neither case, so we join the skeptics and Mike Farnworth in concluding that Cartesian/Newtonian truth is not enough.

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Meanwhile here we are, individually breathing and socially inclined (we consume, compute, etc). For the sake of social limping along, regardless of understanding what it's all about or not, Jefferson claimed the self-evidence of a few social truths stemming from equality of creation,

ratifying himself by positing a Creator. What he had in mind was not so much metaphysical as political. As a political argument it is irrefutable by those with metaphysical suppositions; Jefferson knew this. For us it is a *fait accompli*, a kind of curious antique; we have lost sight of its breathtaking novelty, its experimental audacity, and the fact that what we are now doing only vaguely embodies it.

With all our getting, do we get more purposeful, more valuable, more glorious lives? In a comment attributed to Jeanne d’Arc, “Every man gives his life to that which he believes. Some believe in little or nothing, yet they give their lives for that little or nothing.” My professor was right. With her having ruled out extra-rational knowledge, Truth was not to be found, and we had just as well construct some, and it might just as well lead us into a candlelight demonstration for children’s sexual rights.

The family of horrific activist causes to which this one belongs is resisted in our society only sluggishly. With an abundance of traditional, common sensical, and sociological evidence that certain practices are evil, they nevertheless gain ground rather than being limited to a criminal fringe. This is because rational and empirical proofs, the baskets into which so many have scrambled all their eggs, have brought upon us an age of supertolerance, an age in which “I’m ok; you’re ok” is taken as serious thinking.

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Lest I be misunderstood, I must state that compulsion is wrong. But long-suffering persuasion is required of any to whom much or even little is given. In decrying philosophy, I do not wish to imply that the human mind is less than magnificent or that less than its full use is acceptable. But in the search for certainty it needs someplace to start, a single hummock in the everglade.

YE SHALL KNOW (BY ACTING ON) THE TRUTH

If I could visit with René Descartes, I would ask him to consider *fido, ergo scio*—I have faith, therefore I know. The Latin verb *fidere* is infelicitous because in the first person singular it reminds us of a dog, but especially because no word in our language is its equivalent. We have the verb “to believe,” but we do not have “to faith.” We have “to hearken,” meaning to hear and do, but we do not have “to faith,” meaning to believe and act. Lacking the verb may suggest a tendency to lack the concept.

James (“Faith without works is dead.”), Joseph (“Faith has power, dominion, and authority over all things.”), and David [Bednar] (“Faith is the assurance that precedes the act.”) have been at pains to get us to conceptualize faith as a verb. How curious that it does not exist in our language. Have we been told too few times that knowledge follows, does not precede, the commitment, the act, the work? Fidelity can afford no

limits. Maybe we are an adulterous (*adulterare* means to falsify the covenant) generation. This would be true either if we have lost all our ground to stand on or if we refuse to step out where only swamp seems apparent. Joseph explains that faith is belief in that which is true. Possible as it is, and even ordinary, belief in error is not faith because it has no power—except to lead into erring paths.

I can't predict René's response. His stubborn insistence on starting the quest for truth between his own two ears does hint of a reluctance to be led, "not knowing beforehand the things which [he] should do." I'm not criticizing him; in his situation I might not have done so well. Hugh Nibley's old friend, Paul Springer, grants that faith is a gift: "You either have it or you don't. [Hugh] has it and I don't." But if you have come this far with me, you know by now that I am going to assert, first, that faith is all we have got to go on, and, second, that it is sufficient.

Why should faith be the first principle of the gospel? Watching my Father approach death, smaller in body and in mind than I could ever have imagined him, helpless on the bed to do anything but receive, he illustrated for me that the first principle is also the last. He went forward day to day, familiar with the goal but knowing nothing of the things which he should do.

Aristotle's syllogistic thinking is reductive, teaching us to split problems apart. But problems are like atoms in that splitting them releases surprises. The surprise in the syllogism is that rational statements as major premises do not lead to Truth. Since no rational or empirical statement can ever be proven true, no certain conclusion can be drawn from one. The choices are simple: fall back on *a priori* claims, admit extra-rational verity, or give up. Ordinary good sense does not get sufficient respect in our time to make the list; scholarship has largely given up.

The mouthful "extra-rational verity" signifies no more than faith. An argument is a claim with support. A sermon is an announcement of rules. Prophets do not argue nor defend; they proclaim, and that makes all the difference. Let's apply the power of deductive reasoning to some sermon, say, the Proclamation on the Family. In other words, let's read it having faith that it states Truths on a theme, and see where that gets us with experience and understanding.

The statement: All human beings are created in the image of God.

The experience: I am a human being.

The understanding: I am in the image of God.

Clear enough? Let's look at another one. Remember that the idea is to infuse experience (life, mortal probation, human nature) with meaning by starting off with a Truth. Faith will apply to both ends when the reasoning leads to the exercise of agency, that is, action.

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The truth: Parents have a sacred duty to rear their children in love and righteousness.

The desire: I am (or will be) a dutiful parent.

The action: I am rearing (or will rear) my children in love and righteousness.

That our minds can do this is miraculous if not very difficult, but everything depends on faith, i.e., application of Truth from an extrarational source and patience to let the harvest follow the sowing. Do we accept the major premise as a statement of truth? If so, and if we exercise faith, it is certain that we will act, and predictable what our action will be. My faith in Truth is based in part on past experiences, choices, and outcomes. But it is based in large part on what I have not yet seen.

Shall we despair? With a realization that none of us is very smart nor is going to become very smart, but that primarily we are here testing ourselves upon the gospel's prime principle, we need not be tempted too much. Struggling for understanding is not entirely like running laps, for understanding does come, line upon line, but there is a lap-like quality in it too.

TEACHING TRULY

The firm foundation is faith laid in His excellent word. Nothing here is surprising to the Latter-day Saints. But I am trying to learn to teach it in English class. Teach it in ways deeper than writing or reading this article teaches it. Teach it to help students save themselves from false professors, false reasoning, and false despair. Teach it as part of the course, the essential part of the course, the informing principle behind the reading, thinking, and writing. My best teaching moments are best because they affirm to me and the students why there is a Ricks College, and why there ought to be.

Parents and students could be helped by the simple distinction between truth and Truth. Mormon youth trudge unwillingly to university with the proverbial parental warning in their ears: Do not exchange your testimony for learning. Parents and students could be helped by the simple distinction between truth and Truth. It is a category error—needless, futile, and dangerous—for returned missionaries to argue with geologists and anthropologists about origins of the earth and mankind. Scientific truth is adequate to hurl us half way around the globe in a few hours; I am glad that my faith in aviation is categorically distinct from my faith in prophetic utterance. Both have to do with unreached destinations, with one step being enough for me, but the resemblance stops there. To propel me heavenward, I will not place faith in science or philosophy, or literary theory either.

The world is not wanting for stuff to study. Ours is the information era, not the age of faith. In our post-modernist time, “of making many books there is no end; and much study is a weariness.” From Liahona to fiber optics is not an improvement if the principle that operates the Liahona is lost. What foolishness! Like saying a million static Liahonas are better than one working one. Like saying that information is more to be sought after than understanding. Not long ago this was front page news in our campus paper.

My curmudgeonly insistence on particular reasons and particular non-reasons for studying is not very palatable to students. It first surprises and then dismays them. Then I am gently surprised when a few begin to enjoy it. Each non-reason implies cynicism, while each reason displays faith.

Non-reasons:

- So they can eventually make more money.
- So they can sublimate the fear of naiveté by giving correct answers.
- So they can elevate themselves above others.
- So they can excuse inertness by their elect birth.

Reasons:

- So we can discover things we don't know.
- So we can begin to locate ourselves spiritually.
- So we can develop our connectedness with humanity.
- So we can grow stronger in solving problems.

BYU-Idaho will offer integrated degrees for 120 credits, with an attempt to shift the balance from stuffing young heads with data to teaching youths to teach themselves. This is a good idea. If in the process they also learn to distinguish between truth and Truth, and to exercise faith appropriately in each, they may remain happy and productive members of the Church even as they become productive members of an all-too-worldly society.

If questions are to become the focus of our teaching, rather than answers, perhaps such questions as these may be among them:

- How to distinguish between culture and doctrine?
- What unstated warrants connect causes with effects?
- How to distinguish between truth and hypothesis?
- What is common and not common between rational/empirical knowledge and knowledge attendant on faith?
- How to increase wisdom to use in deciding and choosing?
- What great paradoxes are true?
- How to balance individuality and community?

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THE POSSIBILITY OF A WITNESS

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Many truths are taught in universities, one being that we do not find Truth there. If this did not make me indignant it would plunge me into heartsickness. I feel indignant because my professor was rapt in the spirit of proselytism. She was not teaching this in the spirit of “I report; you decide.” She had a clear and distinct idea, a self-evident truth. Her explanation was about conversion, about paradigm shift. I asked, “What are we trying to replace with what, and why?” I did not want confrontation, but I wanted out of her missionary teaching pool. She didn’t like this, but was honest enough to allow me credit in the class. I would be heartsick because of crumbled hopes and boggy lives in the wake of nihilistic professing and acting. What could be more drearily predictable than the passing away of theories that require all previous theories to pass away? To deny the past is to lose the future.

Gone are the halcyon days when universities taught objective truth, as it was called, sending the graduates out to apply it or not as they chose, disclaiming any ideological stance. This was bad enough, actually, though perhaps excusable while universities were throwing off the yoke of medieval theologies. Some still offer the “We don’t teach values” excuse. But many now teach ideology explicitly, which in times of super-tolerance can take very nasty turns. The invitation to convert to evil is not subtle in our time, as it was not in Sodom. In our hands is the choice whether students’ sojourn among us is leisure time or a workout.

I am not waiting for us to become a light on a candlestick by superior PowerPoint, ACT or GPA, or Market Share, fine as these are, but by old-fashioned testimony of Truth. Reason propagates by analysis and synthesis; faith propagates when Truth is testified to. Faith-promoting stories are good, but since faith is the principle of action, it more properly belongs to the future. With the inestimable gift of faith, we cannot refrain from witnessing it, from bearing down in pure testimony upon sophistry, infusing lives with unassailable and active faith.

In testimony we find ideas occurring and leaping from soul to soul. As with all elemental facts, not knowing why or how does not negate what is. “We trust and are sure,” said Peter, giving utterance to faith far beyond belief. The explanation given him is universal: “Flesh and blood have not revealed it.” Flesh and blood reveal many things, but not the standing room that underlies certainty. How do we know it? “My words are sure,” said He. “Testify,” from *testis* and *facere* (to do), is the oath that established a Roman as a man, giving him presence and potential future. Testimony is not only a way to make truth known but to know oneself and to be known.

Unapologetically, *mantic* (revealed) knowledge is not of this world. Who has received it has felt eternity, however briefly. As it is sublime,

its utterance is not prosaic. King David, having received a large measure, sang, "The law of the Eternal is perfect....His testimony is true: it makes wise the ignorant;...The ordinances of the Eternal are right....O Eternal, my rock and my liberator!" This is ecstatic stuff, and like Aaron our own teaching partners may sometimes feel embarrassed, supposing that we go too far. Ammon answered, "...praise him forever, for he is the Most High God, and has loosed our brethren from the chains of hell...let us glory in the Lord...we will rejoice...we will praise our God...who can glory too much in the Lord?" I'm thinking Descartes would not approve.

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Speaking of disapproval, my English professor has moved on to greener fishing grounds. I wish her happiness, and conclude my paper with a logical chain that contrasts with hers: John evokes the Word, which was in the beginning, was with God, was God. John wrote in Greek, his term being "logos." Since logos means word, it means statement; since statement, idea; hence thought; hence power to think; hence power to organize; hence power to create; hence Creator. Joseph was dissatisfied translating "logos" into "word" and changed it to "the word of my power."

Does this sequence expand the soul because it is based in Truth, or is it true because it expands the soul? Circular arguments often crumble ground from under the feet, but not this one. It invites me to meditate on the Logos, on Alpha and Omega. It suggests that (by faith) I may someday comprehend that to which I testify. It promises that Truth and its exercise by faith may spiral onward in ever widening loops toward the Eternal. ☺