

The “Welding Link” of Culture

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In section 128 of the Doctrine and Covenants, the Prophet Joseph Smith described “a welding link” that must exist between the past, the present, and the future if we are to be made perfect along with both our ancestors and our posterity (verse 18). He refers, of course, to the offering of the ordinances of exaltation so that we can present to the Lord “a book containing the records of our dead, which shall be worthy of all acceptance” (D&C 128:24).

Those who have done any family history work will know the great sense of fulfillment and gratitude that comes when we can learn enough about an ancestor that she ceases to be just another name with a death date to us and is resurrected in our minds as a living human being endowed with a unique personality and all the other human traits that help us develop a connection—or a welding link—to her.

In the emotional sense, this link may be something like the “taming” process that the fox described in Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s classic tale *The Little Prince*:

To me [the fox declared], you are still nothing more than a little boy who is just like a hundred thousand other little boys. And I have no need of you. And you, on your part, have no need of me. To you, I am nothing more than a fox like a hundred thousand other foxes. But if you tame me, then we

*shall need each other. To me, you will be unique in all the world. To you, I shall be unique in all the world. [Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1943), 66]*

Once we have “tamed” our ancestors, they are unique in all the world to us, and our attachment to them grows.

But what I want to propose to you today is that there may be additional essential forms of linkage between ourselves and our loved ones of both yesterday and tomorrow. Our predecessors lived lives very different from those that we are experiencing today, and it is an absolute reality that our posterity will inhabit a world very unlike the one we know—just as my mother, who is here today, born just 15 years after the Wright Brothers took a flying leap at Kitty Hawk, sees her great-grandson Andrew growing up in a world that none of the most creative science fiction writers of her day even began to imagine.

As we ponder the Lord’s injunctions to us in sections 88, 90, and 93 of the Doctrine and

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Covenants—where we are told to diligently study “good books” (D&C 90:15), history, geography, languages, peoples, and virtually every other imaginable discipline—I can’t help but wonder whether the Lord in fact wants us to forge a link between the civilizations of the past and our own day and then to transmit them to our own progeny. Perhaps one of the welding links that will help each of us to be tethered more securely to our ancestors can be achieved by familiarizing ourselves with the cultures in which they were born, lived, married, wept, laughed, and created families of their own. Surely their lives were greatly influenced by the books they read, the music they enjoyed, the dances they danced—just as are yours. It seems to me it would be a terrible waste, since we are the inheritors of the cultural legacy they created, to allow it to die by dismissing it as old-fashioned.

And yet it *is* the death of earlier cultures—due to our failure to study and pass them along—that is of great concern to me. The popular culture of the present has become so pervasive, so omnipresent, and so hypnotically narcotic in its technological manifestations that it has all but fully succeeded in destroying any sense of obligation to learn anything about former days. After all, the word *classic* to many only takes you as far back as “classic rock.” Why sniff around in the musty old archives of a lifeless past when you can simply insert the iPod headphones into your ears and thereby fully immerse yourself in a study of—well, surely there is *something* in there that will help you in your quest for eternal life!

I hesitate to be too critical of contemporary pop culture, if only because some of you are pretty heavily into some aspects of it. I have found that the youth of the Church are, to a surprising degree, more willing to listen to a pulpit-pounding sermon on the law of chastity than to have the worth of their favorite music, movies, or video games called into question.

But there are two significant perils in being unfamiliar with the cultural treasures of the past and being excessively absorbed in contemporary pop culture: first, you run the risk of breaking that critical link with the past; second, you may be overwhelmed as a “torrent of images and sounds” floods over you like the combined plagues of Egypt (the quoted phrase is Todd Gitlin’s, taken from the subtitle of his book *Media Unlimited: How the Torrent of Images and Sounds Overwhelms Our Lives* [New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2002]). So I will have to run the risk of offending some of you as I suggest a few ways in which the modern media glut keeps you not only from accessing the culture of the past but also, most perilously, from having unbroken access to the Spirit of the Lord. As I understand section 121, we are not counseled to have the Holy Ghost as our *intermittent* companion!

I hope you will not dismiss out of hand the following brief critique of contemporary pop culture. Please understand that I am not suggesting that you have bad taste but merely that the range of tastes offered to you through most of the current media is extremely limited and that today’s popular forms of entertainment promote values that in numerous ways are glaringly inconsistent with the principles of the gospel of Jesus Christ. But you already know that, because you have grown up in this culture.

Just as the Lord has reserved His best spirits (that would be you!) for the last days, the adversary is giving us his very worst. Over the course of time, as standards have eroded away, Satan has taken everything sacred and pulled it down to his hellish level.

It simply can’t just be a cosmic coincidence that the tangible object that the adversary most craves—a physical body—is precisely the object toward which he aims the most lethal of his fiery darts in his manipulation of the entertainment media. How to make mortals regard the human body as less than holy?

Very simply, just strip its sacredness of all its modest coverings and parade it to public view; batter it and explode it and riddle it with bullets; and display it nakedly engaged in its most intimate activities to make sure the viewer or listener comes to consider public performances of sexual activity as commonplace. What our Father in Heaven regards as the Holy of Holies Satan treats as an open-set film studio. You can almost hear the fiendish laughs of the demons over every depiction of the physical bodies they so desperately envy being exposed to public view and treated like so much meat in a butcher's shop.

Some of you will regard me as hopelessly out of touch. I hope I am. I would rather make entertainment choices more closely aligned with those of Gordon Hinckley than of Hugh Hefner.

I'm sure you know the directions for how to boil a frog. He'll jump out of the pot if the water is too hot when you put him in it, but if you put him in tepid water and then gradually turn up the heat, he won't notice how bad it's getting for him until it's way too late. I think many of the spiritual challenges you face come because the pot of water into which you were born in today's society is already at the boiling point, and the cultural milieu in which you live can *feel* normal unless you do a couple of very important things to test its temperature. First, acquaint yourselves with the great cultural traditions of the past to give you some point of comparative reference and to remind you how difficult issues can be treated with respect and restraint. Second (and most important), evaluate everything that you take into your mind and spirit using the standards established by the Lord, whose only purpose is to shield you from evil and prepare you for the greater good.

I think most of our problems with the popular media could be solved very simply if we would apply the Lord's clear standard: in our entertainment choices we must seek after those works that are "virtuous, lovely,

or of good report or praiseworthy" (Articles of Faith 1:13). Mormon also provided us a clear measure from the Lord:

For every thing which inviteth to do good, and to persuade to believe in Christ, is sent forth by the power and gift of Christ; wherefore ye may know with a perfect knowledge it is of God.

But whatsoever thing persuadeth men to do evil, and believe not in Christ, and deny him, and serve not God, then ye may know with a perfect knowledge it is of the devil. [Moroni 7:16–17]

Using the Lord's standards, how is contemporary culture faring? Last week I pulled up *Billboard* magazine's list of the top 20 pop songs in the country. Then I read the lyrics to all 20. (*Warning: Do not attempt this at home!*) Even after I had mentally bleeped out all of the obscenities—which were legion—the message that emerged was an ugly, surprisingly consistent message of violence, hate, prejudice, and drug peddling; an obsessive preoccupation with the carnal; and a disturbing denigration of the disposable, interchangeable sex objects known as women. I could not, in good conscience, recommend to you more than one of those 20 songs, with a begrudging admission that another three are probably not overtly destructive. President Boyd K. Packer has taught:

*Some music is spiritually very destructive. You young people know what kind that is. The tempo, the sounds, and the lifestyle of those who perform it repel the Spirit. It is far more dangerous than you may suppose, for it can smother your spiritual senses. [Boyd K. Packer, "Personal Revelation: The Gift, the Test, and the Promise," *Ensign*, November 1994, 61]*

Now, what about movies? I've been listening carefully for the past 19 years, and I haven't heard any prophet during that time declare null and void the straightforward

declaration of President Ezra Taft Benson, who was, I might note, president of the Church in 1986 when he said: “Don’t see R-rated movies or vulgar videos or participate in *any* entertainment that is *immoral, suggestive, or pornographic*” (Ezra Taft Benson, “To the ‘Youth of the Noble Birthright,’” *Ensign*, May 1986, 45; emphasis added). Nor have I noticed a significant reduction in the portrayals of violence, profanity, and sexuality in motion pictures. *Au contraire!* The Church booklet *For the Strength of Youth* similarly provides a useful standard: “Do not attend, view, or participate in entertainment that is *vulgar, immoral, violent, or pornographic in any way*” (*For the Strength of Youth: Fulfilling Our Duty to God* [Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2001], 17; emphasis added). What does that standard do to the excuses “Well, it’s only rated that way because of the violence” or “just because of some bad language”? Why do some think they have reached a certain level of adulthood where prophetic counsel no longer applies to them? To those who stand at the doorways leading into graphic representations of the blood and sins of our current generation, the Lord’s call is: “Come ye out from the wicked, and be ye separate, and touch not their unclean things” (Alma 5:57).

You probably ought to know that while you were sleeping, Hollywood has pulled another fast one on you. Just within the past month, without fanfare or public proclamation, the often-unreliable MPAA ratings board suddenly upped the number of times that infamous word, the vilest of vulgarities—the one beginning with the sixth letter of the alphabet—can be used in PG-13 movies. For some time now, only one use was allowed by the ratings board. But within the past month the PG-13 rating has been awarded to one film containing five uses of that vulgarity. Even more disturbing is the fact that after a documentary maker appealed the R rating given his film, he was allowed to distribute his film with a PG-13 rating, even

though the vulgar word is uttered 42 times in the space of 85 short minutes.

Some of you know even better than I that there are scores of PG-13 movies that are more vulgar and suggestive than some R-rated films. These are the leering, snickering films aimed at a hormonally hobbled teenage audience. They are relentlessly obsessed with crude depictions and descriptions of sexual activity and are blatantly offensive to the Spirit. Parents too often turn a blind eye to the viewing of such films, since, after all, they’re “just” rated PG-13. Meanwhile, the film industry, ever eager to have us pay more for our passions, has started to include a good deal of inappropriate—but *unrated*—material in the DVD releases of their films. Too often a DVD release is intentionally unrated because it is more violent and crude than the theatrical release.

With so much that is odious to the Spirit being hurled at you from movie screens, I suggest that you spend at least as much time checking on the content of a film before you go see it as you do comparing cell-phone rates. There are any number of good Web sites, including kidsinmind.com and screenit.com, that will give you detailed information about a movie’s potentially objectionable features. The bottom-line message here is simple: *Don’t trade your birthright for a mess of footage!*

Okay, so you’re living in a society that’s nearing the final boiling point, a world that continues its free-fall plummet from Kolob while we’re trying to find our way back. What can you do to avoid being *of* that world and its culture if you have heeded prophetic warnings and recognize that you are virtually submerged in very hot water? In addition to simple avoidance and endless vigilance to keep the Spirit with you in all your activities, I would suggest that additional strength will come as you tighten the cultural link between yourself and your ancestors. You will not only have much of great worth to enrich your own life but also you can subsequently pass it along to your

descendants. As with anything that is of true spiritual consequence, however, you must first foster within your heart a *desire* to learn from the past. Then you will no doubt have to fight some significant battles to pull yourself away from the gravitational pull of today's popular culture and media. I encourage you to drink deeply from the wells of culture—your own native culture as well as the civilizations of other places and other times.

I am going to focus my remaining comments on the essential role that reading plays in the lifelong education that the Lord would have you pursue. But please bear in mind that what I say about the ingestion of books applies equally well to the need and responsibility we have to listen to good music, to study great paintings, to attend plays and dances, and to immerse ourselves in many other uplifting ways in the culture that shaped the lives of those to whom we would wish to be linked for eternity.

Why am I so excitable on the simple subject of reading? Because it is happening less and less in our society—most likely because of the rapid development of technological tools that force-feed us contemporary culture at all times and in all places. (Hmm. Sort of sounds like it's in direct competition with our efforts to stand as witnesses of Christ at all times and in all places!) Last year the National Endowment for the Arts published a study entitled "Reading at Risk." The study found that over the past 20 years the percentage of adult Americans who read literature has dropped by more than 10 percent, paralleling a decline in total reading of books, *particularly* in the age group between 18 and 24. During the year 2002, 90 million adults in the U.S. did not read a single book! I think you can guess what young people are doing with their time instead.

What are the benefits of reading? T. S. Eliot said, "We read many books, because we cannot know enough people" ("A Note on Culture and Politics," chapter 5 of *Notes Towards the*

Definition of Culture [New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1949], 87). The only way in mortality that we can really come to know our deceased kindred is by reading about the kinds of lives they lived—whether they happened to be saints or scoundrels. Much can be learned from the choices made by both types. It would be shortsighted to shun the scoundrels and thereby lose the opportunity to learn from their mistakes, repeating them ourselves. For example, although it is not my personal intention to violate the law of chastity, I will live the rest of my life interacting with—and being under a sacred obligation as a disciple of Christ to serve as a positive influence on—people who regularly do engage in immoral activity. Frankly, I would rather gain my understanding of the hearts and minds of such people by reading *Madame Bovary* or *The Heart of the Matter* or *The Once and Future King* than from watching visual depictions of the sin that cannot help but simultaneously glorify and debase it merely by the act of showing it, no matter what moral stance—if any—they take toward the action.

Sven Birkerts, in his book *The Gutenberg Elegies*, wrote:

Reading is at once a movement and a comment of sorts about the place one has left. To open a book voluntarily is at some level to remark the insufficiency either of one's life or of one's orientation toward it. . . . When we read we not only transplant ourselves to the place of the text, but we modify our natural angle of regard upon all things; we reposition the self in order to see differently. . . .

. . . When we enter a novel, no matter what novel, we step into the whole world anew. . . . For the space of our reading, and perhaps beyond, it changes our relation to all things. . . .

*What reading does, ultimately, is keep alive the dangerous and exhilarating idea that . . . life has a unitary pattern inscribed within it, a pattern that we could discern for ourselves if we could somehow lay the whole of our experience out like a map. [Sven Birkerts, *The Gutenberg Elegies: The**

Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1994), 80, 81, 85; emphasis in original]

I might ask: How is the experience of reading that Birkerts describes here qualitatively different from the process of eternal progression? Can we ever become better until we sense and wish to transcend the insufficiencies of our current life? But how do we gain an awareness of those insufficiencies? Through prayer and repentance, of course, but also through reading. Do we have any hope of becoming more like our Creator if we cannot “modify our natural angle of regard upon all things . . . to see [things] differently”—a vision altered, I would suggest, through reading? If we fail somehow to acquire the skill of entering into unfamiliar worlds anew, how can we avoid being trapped—literally damned—in our current imperfections, and how can we ever begin to imagine the infinities where God dwells and labors?

Eight years ago, just after I was appointed dean of the College of Humanities, Elder Henry B. Eyring, then commissioner of the Church Educational System, challenged me to spend some time pondering the answer to a simple question. He asked, “Why do we teach a book like *The Great Gatsby* at BYU?” Now there are many simplistic, snobbishly pedantic ways to dismiss the question altogether. I have chosen to take it seriously—*especially* since this devotional is being broadcast. As I have pondered Elder Eyring’s question, a piece of a part of an answer has begun to crystallize in my head. Before I venture to unload it on you—and please don’t get your hopes up too high!—I have to refer to a favorite passage from one of C. S. Lewis’ space fantasy novels entitled *Perelandra*. In this alternate reading of the Garden of Eden calamity, Lewis conjures up a second Eve. Still innocent but learning much about her paradisiacal garden home, Eve considers the ways in which God’s per-

spectives are superior to ours, and she muses: “When I was young I could imagine no beauty but this of our own world. But [God] can think of all, and all different” (C. S. Lewis, *Perelandra: A Novel* [New York: Scribner Paperback Fiction, 1996], 61).

Can we, I wonder, ever be gods and goddesses of our own universes, eternal parents of imperfect beings who will have to go through the mortal travails as each of us will have done, without somehow having an understanding of and even an empathy toward our flawed progeny? (An empathy better learned, I would suggest, from reading *Hamlet* than from listening to hip-hop.) How do we school ourselves to comprehend—even marvel at and love—the mental and emotional worlds of other people, since we can never live inside their heads or experience life just the way they experience it? How will perfected humans, looking down from the heights of their own Mount Olympuses, be able to observe the stupid, bungling, relentlessly sinful acts of their children and still resist the temptation to thunderbolt them all to ashes?

The training program to develop such divine restraint—or should we call it “charity”?—is, no doubt, a complex one. But I seriously doubt that the products of contemporary popular culture will show up on the syllabus of that training curriculum. Rather, I anticipate that we will need to prepare ourselves to understand the heights and depths of human experience vicariously (perhaps another of our miniscule attempts to mirror the Christ?) through our reading and expanded cultural literacy. We can begin to prepare ourselves now so that in the eternities we can spend some gloriously bright, clear days with our ancestors—discussing the books both they and we have read, listening to mutually evocative masterpieces of music, sharing a bag of perfected popcorn as we laugh at Buster Keaton, weep along with Tom and Ma Joad, and sing and dance with Fred and Ginger.

But this is about a lot more than just cool family home evenings with the eternal “fam.” And why is Fitzgerald’s novel about adultery, obsession, alcoholism, and murder taught at a place like BYU? Well, in part, because all those who are crowned with glory and immortality and eternal lives will have, in their own kingdoms, an array of offspring who are, in their own ways, disobedient, annoying, and horrifying. We will have to learn how to deal with an abundance of our own Jay Gatsbys and Sweeney Todds and Pol Pots and Marquises de Sade and Brian David Mitchells. Just as it is presently the work and the glory of our Father in Heaven to bring to pass *our* immortality and eternal life—in spite of all He knows about us, which is everything—we hope it will someday be *our* work and *our* glory to help provide those same blessings for countless souls who are very much unlike ourselves, and many of them will be supremely unlovable. In my experience, the best way to come to know such people—and not merely to *know* them, but to know them well enough to be able to love them beneath all the layers of their sins and imperfections—is through the instrument of good books. After all, the Lord has repeatedly instructed us to seek wisdom “out of the best books” (D&C 88:118; 109:7, 14).

We each have an eternal moral obligation not only to flee the wickedness that has polluted far too much of the culture of our day but also to seek after the good, the true, the virtuous, and the uplifting that has been produced in the cultures of mankind for countless centuries. None of us will be in mortality long enough to be able to experience all that is good here, so how can we afford to waste our time on the bad? Already in the cultural storehouse of humanity is a huge body of works that will help you better understand who you really are and train you how to relish the nobility as well as the sufferings of the individuals depicted in them, to glory in the quiet strains of hummable melodies, to savor the intelligent turn of

lyrical phrase, and to laugh and to weep at the humanizing films of the past and the present instead of the dehumanizing mate-and-maim movies being served up on far too many local screens.

Parents can—no, in our day, parents *must*—expose their children to an endlessly regenerative menu of good entertainment that can help displace the mindless slop of the garbage heap. But it will take committed parents, siblings, and leaders who make the conscious decision to bring the past into the present, to restore the great works to life in their homes, to buy and play for their families the movies and recordings, to display the art, and to experience together the masterpieces—the pieces that I can only imagine are loved by our Lord and Master Himself. There are *so many* truly inspiring works that our forebears—often under the influence of divine inspiration—were able to create. Could it possibly be that we, without them, cannot be saved?

As disciples of Christ, we have a divine obligation to love the good and the beautiful and to keep ourselves unspotted by the bad and the ugly. In his First Presidency message in last September’s *Ensign*, President Hinckley assured us:

*The situation is far from hopeless. . . . There is no need to stand still and let the filth and violence overwhelm us or to run in despair. The tide, high and menacing as it is, can be turned back if enough [people] will add their strength to the strength of the few who are now effectively working. I believe the challenge to oppose this evil is one from which members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, as citizens, cannot shrink. [Gordon B. Hinckley, “In Opposition to Evil,” *Ensign*, September 2004, 3–4]*

May I encourage you to steep yourselves in the cultural riches of your ancestors. I promise you will be a better, more sensitive, more understanding and appreciative individual—

a better spouse, parent, citizen, and disciple of Christ—as a result. The more links you forge with your ancestors through their culture, the richer the legacy you will have to pass along to your own children and grandchildren. Begin to teach your own children, from the earliest possible moment in their development, the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual value of reading and of cultural linkage. If we continue to lose ground against the torrent of digitized culture that moves so fast that it cannot be given a moral rating, we run the real risk of losing our souls.

I testify to you that we have a loving Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who atoned for the bad within us and around us so that we might

fully embrace the good. I bear witness that He has the power to weld us together with all of our loved ones of all dispensations and for all eternity, and that we can draw closer to them by coming to know them as individuals who actually lived and labored, who read books and listened to music, and whose lives were shaped by their faith and by their culture. That we may, in all our labors and all our recreation, help to create welding links with those who came before us and those who will follow—links of faith, of love, and of reverence for the finest things that the human soul has created—is my sincere prayer in the name of our Savior, Jesus Christ, amen.