

On How We Know

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A friend of mine who has spoken more than once at this lectern said to me one day, “There are no great speakers, there are only great audiences.” I consider this one of the great audiences in the world, and I’m overwhelmed with a sense of destiny. I believe the world’s future is being made right here.

A little boy, I’m told, wrote a letter to God (this is published in a collection of children’s letters). It said, “Dear God, How do you feel about people who don’t believe in you? A friend of mine wants to know.” Recently I was invited to sit in on a graduate class elsewhere—a group most critical and equipped with jaw-breaking terminology and bone-breaking arguments against religion. At one point I said, “So I’ll know where you’re coming from, would each person here consider: If you had only one question to address to Jesus Christ, what would you ask him?” Well, most of those in the room had a grievance and said that they would ask a kind of “pick-a-fight” question. But one lad, in the corner, didn’t respond, and, having been urged, finally said with a thoughtful smile, “Well, if I had only one question, I would ask, ‘How am I doing?’”

Brothers and sisters, over a period of forty years I have worked in the area of “how one

knows.” And I can report, in a comparative mood, that there are really only five main modes that have been appealed to in all the traditions, philosophical or religious: an appeal to reason, an appeal to sense experience, to pragmatic trial and error, to authority—the word of the experts—and, finally, to something a bit ambiguous called “intuition.” I can report, too, that from my judgment those five modes are harmonized and balanced in our living tradition more effectively than in any other tradition I know.

Is there a religious way of knowing? Do these modes leave anything out? To answer that, I want to speak of a religious undergirding experience and not just of religious experiences. Let me tell you that there are evidences now, widely recognized, that religious experiences are far more common than has been observed in the recent past and that they are not simply the projections of infantile regression, which is what some reductive psychological theories say. It is at least possible that the sense of God originates in God himself.

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Let me begin with a few quotations from an almost-forgotten poet, historian, and eventually member of the Council of the Twelve—Orson F. Whitney. Listen.

Why are we drawn toward certain persons, and they to us, as if we had always known each other? Is it a fact that we always have? Is there something, after all, in that much abused term “affinity”? . . . At all events, it is just as logical to look back upon fond associations, as it is to look forward to them. We believe that ties formed in this life will be continued in the life to come; then why not believe that we had similar ties before we came into this world, and that some of them, at least, have been resumed in this state of existence?

After meeting someone whom I had never met before on earth, I have wondered why that person’s face seemed so familiar. More than once, upon hearing a noble sentiment expressed, though unable to recall that I had ever heard it until then, I have found myself in sympathy with it, was thrilled by it, and felt as if I had always known it. The same is true of some strains of music [some perhaps heard today]; they are like echoes of eternity. I do not assert pre-acquaintance in all such cases, but as one thought suggests another these queries arise in the mind.

*When it comes to the Gospel, I feel more positive. Why did the Savior say: “My sheep know my voice?” Did a sheep ever know the voice of its shepherd if it had never heard that voice before? They who love the Truth, and to whom it most strongly appeals—were they not acquainted with it in a previous life? I think so. I believe we knew the Gospel before we came here, and that is what gives to it a familiar sound. [“The Undiscovered Country,” *Improvement Era*, vol. 23 (December 1919), p. 100]*

Now put with that the lines from Eliza R. Snow that we sing and feel, “Oft times a secret something whisper[s], ‘You’re a stranger here.’” That’s what a friend of mine calls “celestial homesickness.” But it is also, I will add, a

feeling that we are here on purpose—that we haven’t just wandered “from a more exalted sphere,” but that we are where we ought to be (see “O My Father,” *Hymns*, 1985, no. 292). That sometimes comes through in a sense that we have seen it or felt it or experienced it before. We are at home at sea. And so I suggest that, as a premise, rather unique to our tradition, recognition, spiritually speaking, is indeed *recognition*, that some discovery is *recovery*, that recollection is the *recollection* of images from before.

B. H. Roberts once said that “Faith [and he meant faith in Christ or trust in Christ] is simply trust in what the spirit learned aeons ago.” Behind that statement are two sovereign truths from our modern revelation. One is that “Man is spirit” (D&C 93:33). Yes, also embodied, but man is spirit. It is even said that man *is* the spirit of truth from the beginning (see D&C 93:23). Hence, says modern revelation, all intelligence, being independent, can either welcome or suppress and repress the Spirit. And if we do not receive it, we are told, we are under condemnation (D&C 93:30–31). On the other hand, if we do receive it, then we are told that light grows “brighter and brighter until the perfect day” (D&C 50:24).

The other truth is that

the word of the Lord is truth, and whatsoever is truth is light, and whatsoever is light is Spirit, even the Spirit of Jesus Christ.

And the Spirit giveth light to every man that cometh into the world; and the Spirit enlighteneth every man through the world, that hearkeneth to the voice of the Spirit. [D&C 84:45–46]

Question: Is it then the case that this beginning light is in everyone? Is it a universal experience? There is enough impact, even in the so-called secular world, that Jung, for example, posits a collective unconscious. You don’t just remember your own autobiography. You remember somehow the whole racial

experience. And thus, he says, a fourteen-year-old girl can have dreams of all the archetypes of human consciousness though she has never experienced them directly in this world. Or again, Joseph Campbell, the great student of comparative religion and myth, wants to say that myths express the depths of man more effectively than so-called prosaic or propositional truths. Some Eastern philosophers, convinced that we have more in our minds than can be accounted for by this life, have concluded that reincarnation or even transmigration is the only explanation. William James once argued that, because of this same phenomenon, there may be a reservoir of spiritual insight which not just exceptional persons but the ordinary man can occasionally break into and recognize. Rudolph Otto has written about the idea of the holy and calls it the “numinous,” just as the word luminous refers to light. This is the sense of the sacred that he holds is universal and isn’t discovered or learned, but somehow given. Many of the theists among modern writers in existentialism have talked about a “depth-self” that even our own best introspection cannot reach.

Now let me quote from the Prophet Joseph Smith leading into reason for a moment. He says,

Every word. . . of Jehovah has such an influence over the human mind—the logical mind— [And I interrupt to say that I think he doesn’t mean simply one trained in formal logic—Aristotelian or Russellian—but a mind that hasn’t been cluttered by the notion that in religion the more contradictions you find the better, that piling paradox on paradox somehow indicates truth. No.] that it is convincing without other testimony. Faith [or trust] comes by hearing [the word]. [The Words of Joseph Smith, comps. and eds. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon Cook (Provo: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1980), p. 237]

Many of you will encounter, if you haven’t, traditional rational arguments for the existence of God. They are all of them afflicted with fallacies. They presuppose in the premises what they claim to demonstrate in the conclusion. And, further, they presuppose in their premises something about the very nature of God.

I suggest that little is given in holy writ that can be called an argument for the existence of God. I suggest that instead of argument there is witness—witness to experience. God is not at the end of a syllogism. But rationality and a mind illumined enable us to follow certain clear inferences from proper and authentic premises.

What about witness? That leads us both to the question of authority and the question of our own testimony. Said the Prophet again, “No generation was ever saved or [for that matter] destroyed upon dead testimony” (*Words of Joseph Smith*, p. 159). I think he means by “dead” the record of the remote past. We’re not fully accountable to that, but we are accountable to a living witness who bears living testimony to our living spirit. That’s when we reach the zenith of responsibility. We recognize that and perhaps run from it. When a child runs away with hands over ears, what is happening? Doesn’t the child already pretty well know the message? Do we cover our ears while saying, “I didn’t hear you”?

Heber C. Kimball, without being grammatical, put the point elegantly after the outpourings of the Nauvoo Temple. He said, “You cannot sin so cheap no more.”

Many students have said to me over the years, “I’m afraid to pray because I’m afraid I won’t get an answer. I’m not sure I could handle that.”

I have sometimes said, a little cruelly, “The problem may be exactly the reverse. You’re afraid to pray because you are afraid you will have an answer, and you already have a shrewd guess as to what it will be.” So if we know what’s bad for us, we will neither listen

to nor bear testimony. But if we know what's good for us, we will. And our spirits know.

Hence, Brigham Young once said, "More testimonies are gained on the feet than on the knees"—by which he meant that when you are on record and in the presence of others, and are trying to be truthful, and you consult the depths of your own soul, you yourself may learn how profoundly you know.

Zina D. H. Young once walked into a room where there was a copy of the Book of Mormon on a windowsill. She had never seen it and, therefore, of course, had never read it. She walked over and felt a certain warmth and aura and held it and then hugged it, murmuring, "This is the truth, truth, truth!" (*Young Woman's Journal* 4:318). I would call that an "a priori" testimony. (Later she read it.)

I know a man who knelt down to say, "Oh, God, is this book true?" and then interrupted himself, "Oh, never mind. I already know. It's true."

A marvelous woman who read part of a chapter in my *Eternal Man* (a chapter really not all mine—I was only citing scripture) shook my hand to thank me. "You know," she said, "I read almost all night, and I laughed all night."

That changed my expression. She said, "I don't mean that the way it sounds. You see, I would say to myself, 'I've always known that. But I didn't know I knew (laugh).'"

She said, "It wasn't the 'Ho, Ho, Ho,' and it wasn't the 'Ho hum' either. It was the 'Aha' experience."

Whenever that happens, there is an accompanying lift. It is exhilarating, and even things that you've heard over and over have new zest and tingle and deepen understanding. Students have said to me and to my colleagues here, "Thank you for teaching me so and so." But the "so and so" was something I did not know, or at least did not attempt to teach that day. A better voice than mine was whispering under my voice, something that they were

then ripe and ready for, and it came. Said the Prophet Joseph again,

All things whatsoever God in his infinite wisdom has seen fit and proper to reveal to us, while we are dwelling in mortality, in regard to our mortal bodies, are revealed to us in the abstract, and independent of affinity of this mortal tabernacle, but are revealed to our spirits precisely as though we had no bodies at all [like a laser beam, I suggest]; And those revelations which will save our spirits will save our bodies. [Teachings, p. 355].

On the senses, a colleague at an eastern university said to me one day, "Yes, I've heard you Mormons have a sixth sense. You do. It is the sense that enables you to swallow this nonsense called Mormonism." Even if you conclude with certain scientific naturalists that anything that is nonsensory is nonsense, that is an endorsement, in a measure, of your heritage. Said Erastus Snow, referring to the Prophet,

Joseph taught that the Spirit of the Lord underlies all our natural senses, that is seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching. The Spirit communicates with the spirit of man and enlivens all the other senses. [BYU Special Collections, MSS. 44, Folder 5]

We are almost unique in this view.

Creative, as well as scientific, people prize accurate observation and all the instruments that have presently become available to intensify it, in the macrocosm and the microcosm. And they also strive to express what they have learned in either the mathematical forms or in the creative arts, a fullness of expression in another language. This is the platform for scientific and aesthetic effort. The senses, far from being disparaged and denied, are as eternal as the spirit.

A famous example of logical positivism is, "Can you verify that there are mountains on

the other side of the moon?" (which are presently unseeable).

"Yes," they say, "in principle they are verifiable. One can conceive of the conditions under which they could be seen." True. Some who came back from space—cosmonauts, I believe—were reported in the press to have said that they didn't find God out there. President Spencer W. Kimball commented that if they had stepped outside their space capsule, they might have.

God and angels and spirits are observable, and in due time we will have the opportunity for confirmation of the very senses as we now have of the spirit. Jesus Christ did say, "Handle me, and see" (Luke 24:39).

Now from Lorenzo Snow,

We were selected, ordained, and set apart there [Where? In the prior life] according to our worthiness and preparation and training to come forth when our preparation fitted clearly into the great plan of our Father. And as we live worthy [and perhaps not otherwise] the Holy Spirit brings this knowledge to this body, and that is the only way we become acquainted with the knowledge of our spiritual understanding. This body must get acquainted with former pre-existent experiences through being revealed to, and made a part of, this flesh. [Journal of John Whitaker, 6 April 1894]

Said Joseph F. Smith,

If Christ knew beforehand [and he's talking about the certain foreknowledge that Jesus must have had in order to volunteer for his mission], so did we. But in coming here, we forgot all, that our agency might be free indeed, to choose good or evil, that we might merit the reward of our own choice and conduct. But by the power of the Spirit, in the redemption of Christ, through obedience, we often catch a spark from the awakened memories of the immortal soul, which lights up our whole being as with the glory of our former home. [Yes, the spark.

Someday the whole flame.] ["Spirit Memories," GD, pp. 13–14]

Elder Parley P. Pratt, who gave this considerable thought, once wrote that it is when we are off-guard that some of these insights spring up unbidden. You need to pay attention to them and try to remember them because they are fleeting and elusive. But, said he, for example, at night as you are approaching quiet slumber, when the outward organs are resting, then "some faint outlines, some confused and half-defined recollections of that heavenly world" may come, "and those endearing scenes of their former estate" enable spirit to commune with spirit. "Soul blends with soul, in all the raptures of mutual, pure and eternal love" (see "Dreams," *Key to the Science of Theology* [Salt Lake City: George Q. Cannon & Sons, Co., 1891], p. 126).

Said Brigham Young,

The spirit is pure, and under the special control and influence of the Lord. . . .

Recollect, brethren and sisters, everyone of you, that when evil is suggested to you, when it arises in your hearts, it is through the temporal organization. When you are tempted, buffeted, and step out of the way inadvertently; when you are overtaken in a fault, or commit an overt act unthinkingly; when you are full of evil passion, and wish to yield to it, then stop and let [that's different than make; it presupposes that the spirit wants this] the spirit, which God has put into your tabernacles, take the lead. If you do that, I will promise that you will overcome all evil, and obtain eternal lives. But many, very many, let the spirit yield to the body, and are overcome and destroyed. [JD 2:256]

So the spirit has a mind of its own, and it is strong, and it speaks with authority. The spirit is saturated with intelligence. The spirit is what prevents you from sinning wholeheartedly.

Now what about authority? Do you want to hear the party line of those of us who get a

little bit paranoid because of abuse from a person who has clout and is over us? (I've often wanted to say that Jesus Christ never lords it over us but under us. He comes down and lifts from below. What about that authority?) We sometimes say in the party line, "Be independent. You don't have to listen to anyone else. What is this stuff about 'Take my word'?" But you belong to a tradition where the word of the prophets is, "Don't just take my word for it. That is blind." How do you know a prophet is a prophet? Only when you are one. Only when you are actuated by the same Spirit. And that's the way you prove the prophetic mantle and how it applies to you.

Said the Prophet Joseph Smith after one of the most revelatory meetings in his life, "There was nothing made known to these men [the Twelve] but what will be made known to all the Saints of the last days, so soon as they are prepared to receive" (*Teachings*, p. 237). This is the religion of every man. Not "Take my word for my experience," but "Duplicate it in your own life." How far do I go with this? All the way.

Let me then come to a close. I have hiked, with my wife and at night, all the way from the base of what is known as Mt. Sinai to the top. (Incidentally, with a very sore toe.

Climbing hurts, and the more you climb, sometimes the more it hurts.) We went up to where the air is thinner and the veil thinner. There isn't time to describe the feeling, but we were able to recollect that Moses, there, had face-to-face communion with God. He came back down and said to the children of Israel, in the name of the God whose name he knew, "Now, you are invited to go back up with me."

And they said, "Thank you. No. That's for prophets. That's for people who are a bit fanatical. We will stay here and you go up, Moses."

In his absence they built an idol. The power of religious impulses goes in many directions. They built an idol—a thing—and were denied the privileges of Moses (D&C 84:23–25). That is what our generation is now doing again. We are staying down below and then claiming superiority for our judgment in doing so.

I bear my testimony that the ways of knowing are true. I bear testimony that there is locked in you, under amnesia, power greater than you can presently imagine. And I bear my testimony that if it is true, then you don't need to leave this room and go anywhere else to investigate, for it has reverberated in your souls. I say this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.