

## Creativity and New Media Mormonism

Gideon O. Burton

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Sometimes a single string of words, a poignant line, is smeared across the mind like luminescent jelly, sticky with its light. We close the book, we move along, and yet that line keeps moving us, persistent in its iterations of a piercing truth. I'll tell you one I found—not in a work of art but from a certain sermon on a Sunday of this year, a metaphor that framed the thoughtful feeling of a man whose soul I've learned to trust.

“The door of worship swings upon the hinge of awe,” said my stake president. It didn't really matter what was said from that point on. The arrow found its mark in me, incredulous at the simplicity and calm profundity those words conveyed. “The door of worship swings upon the hinge of awe,” he said, “and how wide it opens depends upon our preparation.” So there it was, a call to worship, framed in terms of piety, in terms of awe. How wide might swing that door, how open to the warming winds of the divine, how ready I might be for some holy passage to or from a sacred state of being—all depended on my cultivating what? A sense of awe.

Longinus spoke of awe as the “sublime” in ancient times, and in Romantic literary works this reappears, though sometimes draped in gothic garb as something more macabre than holy. Today, sublimity and awe are scarce because our sense of wonder has grown calloused by so many modern miracles, the spectacle of fresh technologies, the wonders filling screens of every size. With secular amazement fresh as CNET's last report, it mutes the chance for reverence and stillness, holiness unsullied by the taint of entertainment, by the curse of commerce. This is not

the awe upon which worship swings its heavy portal. Awe that shakes and shapes the soul is something different, something I have known at times through art, through music, and through words.

I keep a list with me of things sublime—not things, so much, as moments seared into my memory like molten pearl, iridescent with the remnants of a place and time when time and place evaporated and I reached, or I was reached, and something changed; the scales fell from my eyes enough to see or know or span some yawning, nameless chasm to a point of clarity, a lake of light, a chord fleshed out in octaved grandeur, pushing everything that’s broken, pale and ordinary far away. There have been moments, many, when unsummoned sails have ushered me across an ocean to a wide horizon, curtained with a golden dawn of calm. My list includes the names of works of music and those verbal phrases, too, that wrench disorder into order in my mind. Because I’m taught that out of what is minuscule more mighty works can come, I find I need no vast Atlantic Ocean nor a snow-capped mountain to evoke sublimity. Though I have been transported both by Mozart and by Moby Dick, more modest but as meaningful have been a stanza from Neruda or a paragraph within Garcia-Marquez. The pacing of a sentence through conjunctions—set just so—can do the trick, the careful shaping of good consonants, or smooth pentameters that tilt my thinking evenly across a sonnet’s scope.

“The door of worship swings upon the hinge of awe,” he said, and in my reading and my writing, in the act of working words, respecting all their magic powers, taming all their excesses and spinning out infinities from finite alphabets or grammars—comes a kind of working worship. In the welter and the wonder of the words to which I’m witness (or which gruntingly I smith into an instrument of crudely fashioned feeling) comes a potent awe that’s often swung the door

toward a templated state of moving mystery. To see the great creation of the universe, the sea, the continents—these are astounding, but no more to me than prose that folds a host of oceans into shapes discernible with soft precisions of a pleased truth. We scripted, journaled, public-speaking Mormons know a reverence for language. Words are more than tools; they're saviors—of course when saving us from sin. But I'm in awe of words as well for saving me from thinking's tyranny, that storm of self and rumination, layered chaos caught within the crafty crevices of nervous neurons.

I admit I am confused by what I think—how randomly I flit from lofty heights to guttered depths, attending first to something serious, upended, then, by fragments rapidly cascading in a constant, halting dance before my senses. I am frightened by my blasphemies, the inattention given to the best, and far too much attention to the worst. At times I think we find a refuge in our sins precisely since the circling vulture of our guilt provides a reference point within the maelstrom of our musings. Our thinking seeks a dwelling place, our nomad minds are restless with their potent passports winging us to distant cosmos or to local curiosities, to what is trifling and then tragic. Thought is shiftless, hapless, groundless, mixing up our vapored feelings into logic's best attempts, the grounds of our attention being just the flotsam jetsam of what's bursting, burst, or broken. And within this frightful messiness, the compass arcing out a space discernible is something known as language, just a chance for thoughts to range themselves in rows coherent, like the lines of text that row by row assure us books are ordered things, a chance to tether primal wildness, fiery thought. Our waters need a firmament within the crude, creative magma that our conscious thinking always is. From out of cauldrons—bouillabaisse of scraps and patches from the heart, the head, the spleen, the mysteries within—come words in sentences, come

shapes that keep themselves together in provisional pretensions to the permanence of truth. The door of worship for me opens with a word, with words, with reverence for their mortal brittleness, their supple godliness.

Prayed Joseph Smith:

Oh Lord when will the time come when Brother William thy servant and myself shall behold the day that we may stand together and gaze upon Eternal wisdom engraven upon the heavens while the majesty of our God holdeth up the dark curtain, until we may read the round of Eternity to the fullness and satisfaction of our immortal Souls. Oh, Lord God, deliver us in thy due time from the little narrow prison--almost as it were total darkness--of paper, pen and ink, and a crooked, broken, scattered and imperfect language.<sup>1</sup>

And what of that? Such eloquence about ineloquence, such reverence implicit in his metaphors: “the little narrow prison” that is language. Such simplicity within synecdoche, “paper, pen, and ink” and all that, by extension, each of these convey with such concision. And such faith in language in the parallel arrangement of “paper, pen and ink...crooked, broken, scattered.” Such longing spawned within the periodic sentence, keeping closure hanging to the last, suspending in the drama of the growing phrase just what the object was, “imperfect language.” Such order giving able flesh to pleading thought. He means this prayer, uttered as a brief aside within a letter. We can feel it. He reflects what Book of Mormon authors said before in struggling with the makeshift shiftiness of mortal discourse.<sup>2</sup> Joseph made it present, perfect in its irony because within his artful prayer Joseph proved the adequacy of the tool he knew inadequate for utter revelation. In utterance he ushers revelation, puts his hands upon the curtain of eternity, passing

us to passing wonders past the veil of our obscurities, our fingers touching flesh like Nephites passing palms across the risen Savior's wounded feet.

Oh Lord when will the time come when Brother William thy servant and myself shall behold the day that we may stand together and gaze upon Eternal wisdom engraven upon the heavens while the majesty of our God holdeth up the dark curtain, until we may read the round of Eternity to the fullness and satisfaction of our immortal Souls. Oh, Lord God, deliver us in thy due time from the little narrow prison--almost as it were total darkness--of paper, pen and ink, and a crooked, broken, scattered and imperfect language.

It may take time to take it in, how perfectly inside of imperfection Joseph prayed and spoke and smithed these little broken tools into an instrument of awe. But there it is, the door of worship widening as we wonder with our words.

There was a time when words were more our world, when literary ways were standard entrances to wonders of all kinds. The written and the spoken word still beckon us, but in this new millennium the paradigm electric poses potent threats to any primacy for words—at least the sort behaving on a printed page, less varnished by the many media that now upstage the literary world. Our children think in images and sounds as much as words, their brains rewiring for a kind of knowledge hard to follow for us more bound to books. Today it is as though each book and its authority has been unstitched, unbound, set loose, mixed in with every other book, with gross pollutions, too, that mock or minimize the sanctities of printed knowledge.

And what are we to think and what to do as massive data streams recarve the landscape of our art and time and minds? That Amazon of Amazon and Google, commerce mixed with

knowledge mixed with tragicomedies, amorphous modes of seeking, finding, telling, tricking, sharing, daring, staring? I wonder now how Joseph Smith would pray within the prison house that is the polysemic bacchanal of culture overflowing every bound today, confounding us with light and darkness—information overload and overlord. Who knew that knowledge could become pornography, a spectacle to dance before us in the endless vanities of novelty? What would Jesus blog? Would Joseph send text messages? Can wikiness be happiness? Are iPhones seerstones? Peepstones? What a world when we cannot with clarity divide the lightness from the dark! This surfeit proves a dearth; this paradise, a desert; our copia of culture is cocaine. We've fashioned us a spirit world with microchips and mice, and even if one took away from these all things obscene, it would remain a scene of great confusion—not unlike that troubled world of Christianity that preyed on Joseph Smith before he prayed. No longer do I wonder why so much of ancient revelation has remained sealed up. It is a charity to us to be unable to conceive of all there is to think and say and do. I understand, I think, how taxing is a seer's task, what burdens to behold the swelling scene of humankind's great carnival.

Yet here we are, before our screens, the analogs to urim and to thummim, not just watching everything unfold but participating, too, creating things we can't control, and widening the Amazons of more unfiltered content with each email, every photo posted to a site. Are we as Mormons now complicit in this Mardi Gras of culture? Long before these tricky tools have proven they can be a vehicle for good, are we so joined to cyberculture that we're carried off to Babylon while podcasting the trip?

As leaders have been calling me to ponder and to seek a refuge in the sanctuary walls of temples, I have wondered at the wonders of our age. So awesome are the graphics,

animations—all the gadgetry and glory of a digital utopia. Is there any room left over for a sense of awe that's separate from culture's great and spacious mall of mirrors? Can worship of the sort my leader pleaded for be possible online?

We are creators, President Dieter Uchtdorf reminded us last year. And in creation we awaken our divinity, we imitate the God who fashions worlds. Before us, tools for speaking, thinking, seeing rapidly evolve and flourish while the ease of access broadens and the online world becomes a world more natural to all. We are fretting, counting costs, but I see children more the victors than the victims in the new environment as they move from idle entertainment to an active mode of creativity, collaborating and communicating. My 10-year old just listed 60 books on Goodreads, a social sharing site for books. He races to complete another book so he can post a notice for his friends about his reading. My second son has written novels—three of them—because of National Novel Writing Month, where thousands register online to motivate each other to produce 50,000 words in 30 days. And subsequently, he has used a service known as “Critters” through which budding authors can earn credits for critiquing others' chapters, with which they buy priority to have their own work scrutinized by hundreds. And while we rightly count the cost of families torn up by Internet addictions, consider how our families are linking through the web. Of course, there's family history work online, but also more communication binding friends and family in many happy ways. And as creative tools for media become as natural as pens and pencils, we will see the arts electric making miracles in subtle, solid ways. I will tell you one.

My father never did become a musical composer as his mother wished, though precociously he did compose a set of works while young. Eighteen, aboard a navy ship two years

in World War II, my father took a pitch pipe and he penciled, note by note, a minor symphony. A curiosity, the manuscript lay yellowing for over 60 years until my son, eighteen, transcribed it note by note into Finale, that notation software that can simulate an instrument or orchestra in digital renditions. As I assisted, calling out the notes that Perry entered, first I saw how actively he learned the program and then tweaked the levels and the phrasing as he played back measures, phrases. And in the course of just a week, we heard emerging from that tattered manuscript triumphant chords and melodies. Infected by Romantic music, Dad had made a sailor symphony to fit the oceans that he sailed in and that sailed in him. But he had only ever heard it in his mind. My son surprised him at a birthday party, turning on a CD player with the digital rendition he had polished of his grandfather's work. I watched my father, overcome with memory and harmony, as melodies and chords from long ago became enfolded in auditory splendor. I watched the family in stunned amazement that this lawyer-author had such rhapsodies of music swirling in his soul at age 18. I watched my son who couldn't know the gift that he had animated for my father. This was a very sacred family time for us. The door of worship flung itself to breaking as three generations bound themselves anew to one another through this wonder, binding and combining talents, feelings, sealing us together in crescendos made of art and time and talent and—as secular as it may sound—of software.

So long as Mormons hold themselves within a purely cautious posture toward the multiplying media that mark this generation, they cannot know the gifts our family knew that day. Our Mormonism, just as Terryl Givens has asserted, brings the sacred and the secular together in a paradoxical union some may see as blasphemous. If God can show Himself to farm boys; if domestic life can be a path to holiness; if the worldly arts can be redeemed for righteous

purposes, then why not look for wonders in the Internet? We cannot read the visions given Moses or to Nephi and not find a kind of holy ogling using Google Earth. And if we know ourselves to be as God as we create, and if we know that out of small things come the greater ones, then how can we not urge our children to explore the means now given them to be creative? We protect our children, filtering them from certain harm. But in our prophylactic protectiveness we could keep them from wonders only found with instruments electric. Joseph Smith began with a sacred book; the Lord gave him other instruments to complete his mission and to transmit to us a host of wonders. Every art can open wickedness, just as pages of the Book of Mormon hiss with awful evil acts. But can we have the faith that these evolving digital instruments can open us to holiness, as well?

My religious faith and my faith in words are intermixed. It will take a fresh humility to look for equal wonders coming from those media that can so quickly tarnish or distract us. Perhaps they can awaken holy passions, not just lustful drives or wasteful ways. Creation is a form of worship, hinged upon our readiness to use it with a pure intent. How wide creation opens us to our divinity depends upon humility, a willingness to find the holy in the means that are at hand.

## Notes

1. Joseph Smith, "Letter to William W. Phelps, Nov. 27<sup>th</sup>, 1832." *History of the Church* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1902), p. 299.
2. See 2 Nephi 33:1; Jacob 4:1; Ether 12:24



