

Revelation

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<http://mccue.cc/bob/spirituality.htm>

Whenever someone sorrows, I do not say, "forget it," or "it will pass," or "it could be worse" -- all of which deny the integrity of the painful experience. But I say, to the contrary, "It is worse than you may allow yourself to think. Delve into the depth. Stay with the feeling. Think of it as a precious source of knowledge and guidance. Then and only then will you be ready to face it and be transformed in the process. Peter Koestenbaum

For days I had hardly spoken. My wife and family had seen this before. "Dad is working on a big deal – better leave him alone."

I left early and came home late, oblivious to my own silence and complete focus. Time had disappeared for me. While in this state on other occasions I had been able to cut through massive amounts of information to prepare for exams or solve complex problems related to the corporate and tax issues that are the bread and butter of my legal practice.

My colleagues at the office thought something similar:

"Bob is on something big. Boy, is he focused!"

"Bob is here every morning when I get here and still at his desk pounding away when I leave at night."

"Last weekend Bob was here both days, all day. Has he ever worked on Sunday before?"

My assistant had answered the phone for days, more often than not, with, "... I'm sorry, but he can't take your call...."

Nothing I could have said would make my professional and business colleagues – irreligious "gentiles" that they were – understand the magnitude of the "deal" I was working on. Many of them would have laughed out loud had I been honest with them. And the reaction of my Mormon family, friends and business associates would be much worse. This was a solitary burden.

I had slowly, unwillingly, acknowledged during the course of the last few days that a doubt I had barely been aware of had taken over my life – a wretched life that at this moment lay shattered on the floor of my downtown office.

"Those fucking doubts!" I muttered. I had to admit they had been there for years, gnawing at the roots of my certainty. And then out came a goddamn chain saw. And where was this "fuck" stuff coming from? I had not thought, let alone said, that word since I was a teenager. Now I couldn't get it out of my head. Some kind of a dam had burst inside me, and I was drowning.

Why had I not seen this coming? It was so plain now that it was in front of me. I felt worse than an idiot. I had been so sure of myself; so smugly condescending toward those who

believed differently than I did; so arrogant! I was the smart one. What an asshole! What a fucking fool! I did not want to ever show my face in public again.

The moment of truth had arrived. I stopped reading. I stopped writing. No more endless essays to myself attempting to rationalize continuing to believe, or even just live, as I had been – the way I was conditioned from infancy to think was the only “true” – the only “good” – way. I stopped fighting. I gave up. That fucking, wretched, insignificant doubt had become my best guess at a truth so awful it had been until a few days ago beyond my Mormon imagination. “I TRUSTED THEM MORE THAN ANYONE ON EARTH, AND THOSE FUCKING BASTARDS HAVE BEEN LYING TO ME!!!”

I had held those words back for days. Now I thought them and acknowledged their legitimacy. This was not some crazed rant. This was, as horrifying as it seemed, by far the most likely scenario. My submission to this awful reality burst some kind of barrier between my ears. Then I said out loud. “Those fuckers have been lying to me!!!” Somehow that seemed to help. I looked around to make sure my office door was closed. And then from nowhere, tears came again. “WHY DID THEY DO THIS TO US?!!!” That question would echo for months.

“THOSE QUESTIONS SHOULD HAVE BEEN EASY TO ANSWER!!!!” I barely kept these words from exploding from me in a way that would have brought people running to my closed office door. THOSE FUCKING QUESTIONS had shown me something so awful I did not want to go on living.

I remembered logging onto an “anti-Mormon” website for the first time ever just three weeks ago to help an old friend answer some questions that troubled him enough to end his association with the Mormon Church. “I’ll give him a hand”, I had thought. “He was never smart enough to figure this stuff out on his own. No wonder he’s confused.” Since then I had spent over ten hours a day reading books and online information about Mormonism – bouncing between what I had come to recognize as “apologetic” writing that was not worth shit, strident anti-Mormon material that was worth little more than shit, and relatively sound academic treatments of the same subjects.

“FUCKITALL!!!!” I lurched forward in my chair and almost threw the computer from my desk through the window. At the last moment I satisfied my rage by smashing clenched fists against my desk so hard that it must have made people up and down the hall wonder what the hell had happened.

“I can’t trust anyone! My life is based on fucking lies!”

“I am completely fucking alone!!”

“I was just released as the fucking Stake Mission President! I was a goddamn MORMON BISHOP!!”

“I HAVE BEEN DECEIVING PEOPLE WHO HAVE TRUSTED ME AND RELIED ON ME TO GUIDE THEM!!!”

“I WAS THE GODDAMN WATCHMAN ON THE FUCKING TOWER!!!!”

“I HAVE BEEN DECEIVING THE PEOPLE I LOVE THE MOST!!!!!!”

"I WAS ONE OF THOSE FUCKING LIARS!!!!"

"I HAVE BEEN LIVING A FUCKING LIE!!!!!!"

I silently screamed at myself. Over and over again. And thought,

"I am regressing. There are no limits. Nothing is real. Good is bad. Truth is Lie. Is Lie Truth? Is Food Shit? Is Shit Food? I AM GOING FUCKING CRAZY!!!"

The chaos that had simmered unnoticed beneath life's veneer was boiling over.

I was not worth shit. The question "Why live?" did not nag at me. It was eating my guts in huge bites. I remembered those poor goddamn kids on the Discovery Channel who collapse in fear during primitive initiation rites, like female circumcision, and immediately try to commit suicide because death is better than being kicked out of the only group you know. The assholes that run human groups OWN US!!

More Discovery Channel programming leaped to mind – newly caged animals with panic etched in every body line as they race around looking for a way out. No, that didn't fit. It was those poor bastards standing in the blown out windows of the World Trade Center with fire raging behind them, clutching desperately at window frames as they look hundreds of feet down to the street below while the realization dawns that they WILL JUMP. I glanced at my office tower window and wondered how hard I would have to throw myself at it to smash through. The idea was attractive enough to linger.

Then I remembered those pathetic snakes we used to torture as little kids. Catch a snake; pop open its mouth; put a firecracker into it; light the firecracker; and then let the snake wildly slither away to a "mind expanding" experience. We acted like that was so fucking funny, while feeling kind of sick about it at the same time. Life is as arbitrary and cruel as a small child. So now I had a stick of dynamite in my goddamn mouth and the fuse had just hit bottom. I was waiting for doom like Wily Fucking Coyote after yet another mishap with the Roadrunner. But I didn't have the endless life of a fucking cartoon character. "This is real!!!!", I almost screamed. Then, "Come on!!! Haven't you learned anything?!!! Why do you think anything is fucking real?!!! How the fuck can you think you know anything?!!!!"

Blood thumped through my head. I looked away from the computer screen that had driven the last nail into my coffin. Tears still flowed. I thought I was past crying. What I thought must be my last tears had welled up this morning as I thought about what it would be like to tell my wife and Mormon missionary son about what I had discovered. How the fuck was I going to do that? What would they do? I couldn't even hold those thoughts in my head. They were killing me. So back to trying to find a way out I went. But there was no way out. And I now surrendered.

I had nothing left. My stomach was in a constant roar. My asshole felt like hamburger from spewing acid, and little else it seemed, for almost two weeks.

I closed my eyes and put my head in my hands. That made me realize that I was still grinding my teeth. And my head pounded. I sat up and reached for the Tylenol that had been my companion for weeks, and almost blacked out.

"Goddamn it! I'm hyperventilating again!!"

I pushed back my chair, put my head between my knees, and held my breath. As my hands dangled limp against the floor, the room stopped spinning.

Postscript: Since some people may find this story disconnected from its introduction on my website, I will include here some background related to it.

The story above was running through my head when I woke up this morning. It is loosely modeled on several intense days in July, 2002. My experience contained each of the elements of the story above, but I did not try to accurately describe what happened to me. I do not think I am capable of that. The intensity of the first few weeks of changing belief was such that I think it has likely pulled in all kinds of things that have happened since. So I don't trust myself to accurately describe the details of my own state of mind during that period of time and I will not try to do that. But this story captures the essence of my experience, and so I have used my own name in it.

I don't know why this story showed up today instead of some other. I have done nothing lately to stir the pot, and in fact have been so busy at the office that I have had little chance to read or write about anything other than law. And it is usually reading and writing about issues related to Mormonism that brings experiences of this type to the surface for me.

My initial inclination was that this was the beginning of a larger story I needed to articulate in the course of my ongoing therapy as a recovering literalist believer – a recovering Mormon. Writing about these things is my primary way of dealing with them while growing a new brain and helping new and what seem like healthier thought patterns to stabilize. But the well dried up where the story stops. After a few tries to “finish” it, I decided that it is complete as it is. The reader should be left hanging without the conflict this piece creates being resolved. Let each reader write her own conclusion. That process could be used as a mirror into the state of the soul who makes the attempt.

Some have questioned my use of profanity in this and a few other things I have written. I don't use profanity much in my speech. Hardly at all, in fact. However, I was a very profane teenager and so have my vocabulary in that regard. Until recently, the “rebellious” teenage period of my life represented the worst of chaos for me. That is how I was trained by well-meaning parents and religious leaders to perceive my experience. And that is why it was so terrifying to feel that aspect of myself literally flood in and take over as soon as the restraining force of religious belief was removed. It was as if a dam had burst. People who do not have a history similar to mine would probably not experience what I did in this regard. Other things that represent chaos to them, however, may make themselves felt in ways that I might have trouble understanding. This is a version of the “thing most feared” that Orwell described in “1984” as being the psychological tool used by Big Brother to mentally break dissidents. We each have our “thing most feared”, and it will often be a product of the social conditioning we have undergone.

I also note that those who were not as literalist in the belief, or as committed to their belief system as I was would not have the same kind of violent reaction I did. Think of a spring that has been wound. The more powerful the spring and the further it has been wound the more energy is release when it unwinds.

Many of my reasons for behaviour have changed. I no longer fear hell fire if I use god's name in vain or am otherwise profane. Rather, I communicate in a way that I feel is consistent with who I am - a way that is comfortable for me. The occasional use of profanity is part of this. However,

language of the type used above is something quite special. I can't imagine a situation in real life, right now, that could elicit that from me. The situation described in the above story, however, was just that. I was in "extremis", as they say. And my ability to control my language dissolved. I noticed, interestingly, the same thing in my devout Mormon grandmother as she approached senility. I don't know where she got her vocabulary, but it was better developed than I would have guessed it could be. As the acuity of her mind declined, a surprising measure of profane chaos asserted itself in her.

I am just getting to the point in my recovery from the literalist beliefs that were pounded into me by my Mormon upbringing at which I can look the reality of my initial horror, as described above, in the eye. That was a high voltage moment. We need distance from powerful experiences of this nature to be able to deal with them safely. In particular, the compelling impression that my entire world was dissolving into chaos was the most terrifying thing I have ever experienced – far worse than the few moments during which I had good reason to wonder if a car-accident-in-progress or stupidity-while-rock-climbing, etc. would take my life.

Shortly after my "exit" from Mormonism I had lunch with Joe Woodard, the religion editor of our local paper, the Calgary Herald. He is a devout Catholic, has a PhD (I think) in philosophy and travelled a long way from his Catholic faith roots before coming back to them in mid-adulthood. He and his wife married and started a family relatively late in life. He would be in his mid-50s, and they have a toddler as well as seven other children. Newspaper editors don't make a lot of money. They live a Spartan existence, and he seems happy. I consider him to be a wise person in most ways.

A few things Joe said to me over lunch about spiritual metamorphoses have echoed for me numerous times. He said that he has seen lots of people go through what I am relative to different faiths, and told me to expect a wave, or pendulum, phenomenon. That is, I would have euphoric days, and near suicidal days, and that the peaks and troughs (or pendulum swings) would gradually settle down as life stabilized for me again. A massive amount of energy, he said, had just been injected into my spiritual system, and it would take time for that to dissipate. The story above captures the moment at which the perfect storm reached its crescendo in my life. He counselled that I should be careful not to make important decisions until the waves calmed. He said to expect something like two or three years of heavy, but gradually declining, seas. He was prophetic.

I note that for most people who go through what I did, the process is more drawn out. I went from true believer to unbeliever in a matter of weeks as a result of obeying throughout my adult life the Mormon leadership edict not to read material that questioned what they said, and then suddenly immersing myself in that very material and quickly determining that it was a much more sound depiction of reality than what I had been fed up until then. Those who have been exposed to a broader range of information over a long period of time will likely never experience the moment of naked revelation I did. And I do not recommend the approach I took. However, the more faithful one is to Mormon leaders, the more likely my kind of epiphany becomes.

I think the wave analogy is the better of the two I suggested above. Pendulums are too predictable. Waves come in cycles and while their size during a storm gradually dies down toward their state during calm, there is a seemingly random (but statistically predictable for those with adequate perspective) aspect to wave size. Every now and again in both storm and calm, a huge wave (relative to its immediate neighbours) comes along. Some coast dwellers (as I have been for about half my life) call these "rogue waves". I know people who have lost family

members to such waves. While I was a Mormon Bishop, I presided over and spoke at the funeral of a rogue wave victim.

While we are between waves there is nothing to tell us how big the next one is going to be. As time passes after a storm, its energy is dissipated through the waves it sends out, and the rogues become smaller and less frequent. This is precisely what I have experienced in spiritual terms.

As long as there was a chance that another big wave might hit me at any moment, it was too risky for me to acknowledge the power – the reality shattering quality – of the first massive hit I took. I could not safely think, let alone write, about it. The Crack of Doom opened before me each time a thought related to those few days would flicker through my mind. This would often produce an involuntarily shudder.

So the fact that the above story came spontaneously to the surface as I was waking up yesterday is a profoundly good sign for my recovery, as far as I am concerned.

As an aside, I note that I don't advocate anger except within a limited context. See <http://home.mccue.cc:10000/bob/documents/rs.martha%20beck%20anger.pdf> for my thoughts in that regard. However, the raw terror of the situation I described above must be expected to produce a powerful emotional response, and for a time that will manifest itself in the vast majority of us as anger. There is nothing wrong with that. I was so angry I had great difficulty speaking civilly of anything Mormon for months.

I had (and still have to an extent) much more trouble staying under control when discussing religion with my wife or returned missionary son (because I feared losing them over this issue) than with people I don't know. I had great difficulty civilly discussing Mormonism with my parents and the few LDS authority figures who have contacted me because, I suspect, they are each in different ways so intimately connected to the social conditioning system that with the best intentions retarded and warped my individual and social development in so many ways.

And yet I am grateful beyond my capacity to express it for my current perception of life and humanity. I do not spend much time thinking about what might have been, except to the extent necessary to understand what happened and to warn those I love the most away from the things that I believe have harmed me. I do try not fret about the things in my life that I can't change, and rather look for what I can embrace. For example, I have a wonderful wife; seven wonderful children; a miraculous grandson; a good job; relatively good health; more fine friends than ever; a seemingly inexhaustible curiosity about the wherefores and whys of life (or am I just easily amused?); etc. I am a fortunate man, and live my life in gratitude's soothing breeze most of the time.

In being able to tell the story above, I have gotten down near the roots of a prolific weed in my soul, and though I have not pulled it out, I have loosened it considerably. I invite you to celebrate this small victory with me.