

6th July, 2012

To each and all of the Smith Clan —

First, I would like to apologize for the zeal with which I've contended in your home regarding the topic of education. I'm sure there have been far too many times wherein I've launched my assault upon your contemporary views with much the same ferocity as a wolf attacking a henhouse (though I would be willingly disposed to observe the astonishment of that wolf were the hens to be as prepared to defend themselves against the wolf as you Smiths are to defend against my attack on the topic of compulsory schooling; that would be an education for the wolf indeed). To be sure, like the wolf, I, too have received an enlargement in my own education each time I depart from the battlefield. This last time was no exception.

Perhaps a battlefield is too dreary a setting to describe the backdrop of our debates. I'm more inclined to paint the scene of a classic sports field (one which accompanies any high school in America) as the concourse wherein our fiery sparks have lit off our competitive spirits, quickly running to fever pitch. Oh, we've jogged onto the field innocently enough, ready to compete for our own honor and stake in the game. A bit of harmless chasing, tackling, kicking and scoring at the opponent's expense constitutes an evening of excitement for many a generation, and so why not ours? We have, on these occasions, set off for a casual bout, but soon realized the unfortunate reality that the sweet taste of victory, sought most ardently by each side, can only be enjoyed by one. And thus, the games must always become serious.

But it seems we didn't have time amidst the struggle to stop and notice that our jerseys were the same color, or that our fans were cheering for both sides as one alike. Would we have found, had we observed, that there was only one set of goalposts, with each side haplessly laboring to keep the other from getting too close for a point? As I look back on these few but notable tournaments in your home, I find myself reflecting on an odd incongruity in these and other points. It's almost as if one team was tricked into playing against itself, possibly even so that despite racking up a win for the one half of the players, the loss would tarnish the record for all.

While we were contending, I am therefore wont to wonder how we failed to notice that we were both playing for the same side. After all, it seems clear enough to me that education is vitally important to Team Smith, just as much as it is for Team Adair. And while I hardly think either side would defend the virtues of a national schooling system that ranks somewhere between average to poor worldwide¹, there is no disputing the argument that "*it could be worse*".

But alas, does that apathetic sentiment tell us something about where we are headed as a society? After all, one might instead posit, "*What shall I do to make it better?*" Surely there are some who are wondering and even working on this very problem. Yet we must wonder whether the answers on which they'll settle are prudent or wise.

For instance, in seeking answers, will they address the underlying *cause* of the "dropout epidemic"? Or will they simply put forth blind attempts to curb the problem without any real

insights into the symptoms? Will these experts and solution-seekers take into account the fact that suicide is the third leading cause of death among teenagers² (but only the 11th highest cause of death for other age groups)? One could argue that a huge component of these deaths is parental apathy toward their child, and rightly so. But where does a school system (one which puts a direct strain on that parent-child relationship while artificially attempting to replace the parental responsibility for that child) stand in shouldering a portion of the blame for that breakdown? What makes our kids so unhappy that they consider it a better option to *end their own life* instead of seeking out hope and help? And lastly, do we have the stomach for the *direction* the system is heading, that being the inescapable reality of **longer** school days, school weeks, and school years, as well as an increased workload on our youth? Already they rival their elder housemates in hours of labor per week. What do child labor laws protect against if not unproductive toil that culminates in unpaid overtime?

And is all of this *still* a red herring, a distraction from the most crucial point of our debate? Indeed, *what is the most crucial point of the debate?* I humbly re-submit for examination that it is this: *compulsion*. The conversation we last engaged in regarding compulsion was very curious to me. I cannot trust that the beliefs professed by my opponents were sincere, and hope that upon a fuller deconstruction they will be abandoned as merely noble and passionate attempts to gain victorious defeat over an opposing team in friendly contest, and nothing more.

As a precursor, it should be known that I am under no illusion to the notion that I am anything more than a lone figure standing against a sea of foes, all of them united against me on the topic of compulsion. It is me against the common mind of society today, and not merely me against you. You are the clear majority, and would be better called the entirety if only I were willing to cross over to your side. In that, you can take comfort. But let me see all the same whether I can reason with you, and persuade your passage to my way of thinking, a way which I believe is rooted firmly in an eternal principle. A little compulsion, I contend, is still too sour a jar of milk.

On the matter of compulsion, I will begin with the One who we all revere most, that being our Savior and the master teacher of all time, Jesus Christ.

Christ taught His people through parables, as to ensure that the agency of man would not be encroached upon:

"Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand.

"And in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Esaias, which saith, By hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and shall not perceive:

"For this people's heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed; lest at any time they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them."³

Despite his perfect nature and capabilities, he declined even to speak in a way that might compel men - even his own people, the Jews - to hear truth and reason, instead opting to speak only in a manner which would be understood by willing seekers of truth and wisdom. Arguably, His

answers still require that the earnest seeker ponder on and "discover" the message for him or herself, and often even then only through the guidance of the Holy Ghost, another completely non-compulsory attendant. His view is certainly a long one. He is *still* waiting patiently on the Jews to gain ears to hear and eyes to see. Would we wait so long for our own children (who, incidentally, are really *His* children too)?

We know of only one way in which Christ learned, and gained wisdom in His youth:

"And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, filled with wisdom: and the grace of God was upon him."⁴

Strangely absent is the mention of lectures, workbooks, tests, homework, or grades. The only teaching agent which Luke found worthy of note was, once again, the Spirit.

During his life, Christ taught most commonly by answering the questions of those willing to inquire, as is the case of the teachers in the temple:

"And it came to pass, that after three days [His parents] found him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the doctors, and they were hearing him, and asking him questions.

"And all that heard him were astonished at his understanding and answers."⁵

in the story of the wealthy man:

"And, behold, one came and said unto him, Good Master, *what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?*

"Honour thy father and *thy* mother: and, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.

"The young man saith unto him, All these things have I kept from my youth up: what lack I yet?

"Jesus said unto him, If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me."⁶ (emphasis added)

and in response to the pernicious lawyer (to which Christ offered the parable of the Good Samaritan):

"And, behold, a certain lawyer stood up, and tempted him, saying, Master, *what shall I do to inherit eternal life?*

"And he answering said, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself.

"And he said unto him, Thou hast answered right: this do, and thou shalt live.

"But he, willing to justify himself, said unto Jesus, And who is my neighbour?⁷ (emphasis added)

Might Christ have understood that for true learning to take place the learner must be invested in the answers (something that can most easily be indicated by the asking of a question, coupled with the manner in which it is asked)? Take note, for example that despite the last two stories

sharing the same question they do not afford the same answers, but are instead tailored to each hearer.

There is no record of Christ forcing men to sit and listen to the greatest wisdom this world has ever known — no stories of men being compelled to learn. He “went about doing good”, but never violated the principle that men are free agents unto themselves. Do we presume to think we have greater wisdom or intelligence to offer than He? A fear that His way will not work as we raise, educate, and guide our children is the antithesis of faith. Faith is *the crucial ingredient* in understanding His plan in this life. Without it, seeds of knowledge cannot grow, and souls cannot be enlarged.

Furthermore, the topic of agency vs. compulsion has been addressed by other prophets, ancient and modern alike. When Alma sought to use the law as a weapon of force against the people of the church who were caught in sin, King Mosiah instructed Alma to judge the people's sins in his capacity as their ecclesiastical leader, rather than himself (King Mosiah) electing to compel the people to follow God's laws under the guise of secular law. And when a troubled Alma turned to the Lord in prayer, the Lord gave clear instruction that Alma grant unto each citizen according to their individual choice and agency:

"29) Therefore I say unto you, Go; and whosoever transgresseth against me, him shall ye judge according to the sins which he has committed; and if he confess his sins before thee and me, and repenteth in the sincerity of his heart, him shall ye forgive, and I will forgive him also.

"30) Yea, and as often as my people repent will I forgive them their trespasses against me.

"31) And ye shall also forgive one another your trespasses; for verily I say unto you, he that forgiveth not his neighbor's trespasses when he says that he repents, the same hath brought himself under condemnation.

"32) Now I say unto you, Go; and whosoever will not repent of his sins the same shall not be numbered among my people; and this shall be observed from this time forward."⁸

The Lord made it clear that one's personal choices reign supreme in His eyes, and that this principle shall not be infringed upon. Additionally, a recipe for changing hearts of others is hinted at in Mosiah (Chapter 26 verse 31, above). As we live true principles and tend to our own duties by properly exercising our own agency, our power to affect others for good is heightened. Not to be overlooked is Christ's own perfect example of none other than, well, a perfect example. He didn't preach anything but that he showed first the way. His views on the principle of example and compulsion are perfectly confirmed and illustrated through the passage of D&C Section 121:

"The powers of heaven cannot be **controlled** nor handled only upon the principles of righteousness.

"That they may be conferred upon us, it is true; but when we undertake to cover our sins, or to gratify our pride, our vain ambition, or to exercise **control** or **dominion** or **compulsion** upon the souls of the **children** of men, in any degree of unrighteousness, behold, the heavens withdraw themselves; the Spirit of the Lord is grieved; and when it is withdrawn, Amen to the priesthood or the **authority** of that man.

"We have learned by sad experience that it is the nature and disposition of almost all men, as soon as they get a little authority, as they suppose, they will immediately begin to exercise **unrighteous dominion**.

"No power or influence can or ought to be maintained by virtue of the priesthood, only by *persuasion*, by *long-suffering*, by *gentleness* and *meekness*, and by *love unfeigned*; By *kindness*, and *pure knowledge*, which shall greatly enlarge the soul *without hypocrisy*, and *without guile*.

"Let thy bowels also be full of *charity* towards all men, and to the household of *faith*, and let *virtue* garnish thy thoughts unceasingly; then shall thy *confidence* wax strong in the presence of God; and the doctrine of the priesthood shall distil upon thy soul as the dews from heaven.

"The Holy Ghost shall be thy constant companion, and thy scepter an unchanging scepter of righteousness and truth; and thy dominion shall be an everlasting dominion, and *without compulsory means it shall flow unto thee forever and ever*.¹⁹ (emphasis added)

It was asserted the other night that 'all things are compulsory, even God's plan for His children'. It logically stands that this intractable doctrine must either be completely false (and the above passage from D&C 121 true), or that the passage from D&C 121 is completely fallacious and this new, obscure stance on eternal compulsion will prevail in the end. They are completely contradictory, and only one can stand true.

D&C Section 58, however, seems to further strengthen the message of non-compulsion:

"For behold, it is not meet that I should command in all things; for he that is **compelled** in all things, the same is a **slothful** and not a wise servant; wherefore he receiveth no reward.

"Verily I say, men should be anxiously engaged in a good cause, and do many things of *their own free will*, and bring to pass much righteousness;

"For the power is in them, wherein they are *agents unto themselves*. And inasmuch as men do good they shall in nowise lose their reward.

"But he that doeth not anything until he is commanded, and receiveth a commandment with doubtful heart, and keepeth it with slothfulness, the same is damned.¹⁰ (emphasis added)

How many students today, by this very definition, are indeed damned? Don't we as leaders, mentors, and parents give them no other choice, enabling this slothful nature by constantly compelling them?

I believe the concept is clearly laid out: we must be free to choose for ourselves good or evil, action or slothfulness, God or mammon, and it then becomes God's full intention (and right) to judge us at the conclusion of our short tenure here on Earth. And yet it would seem that we, the members of modern society have presumed to take the last word on damnation (from section 58, above) as a charge unto ourselves to execute that judgement of our fellow men. Wouldn't our time be better spent ensuring we were prepared for this final judgement, rather than attempting to compel and coerce our fellow men to be worthy for that same judgement?

Joseph Smith (the uneducated boy of fourteen who became the Prophet of the Restoration of the Lord's gospel on Earth in the latter days) later summed up this principle perfectly. On the topic of

how he was able to govern so many people and at the same time maintain such perfect order, the prophet responded:

"It is very easy to do. I teach them correct principles and they govern themselves."¹¹

In modern times, we are guided by messages that sound like this:

"We have implanted in our souls a desire to be free. The Lord understood this when He granted us our mortal probation. With that freedom, however, comes accountability. We are instructed not to idle away our time nor bury our talents and not use them. We are expected to make our lives better through *our own* initiatives and efforts."¹² (emphasis added)

Again, if this is not a testament to the divine nature of the law of agency, autonomy, and non-compulsion, then I assert that the world cannot be round.

As president Hinckley said in a youth fireside in 2001 (for which I was personally present):

"Believe in yourselves as sons and daughters of God—men and women with *unlimited potential to do good in the world*. Believe in personal virtue. There is no substitute for it anywhere under the heavens. Believe in your power to discipline yourselves against the evils that could destroy you."¹³ (emphasis added)

Now I pose a question: how can the youth in this day and age be expected to 'believe in themselves' if their mentors, leaders, and parents do not believe in them far enough to allow them to learn, work, develop principles of personal character, or even use the bathroom without explicit consent from us, their elders?

Kelly mentioned (in our last conversation) that he learned early on that he need only run faster and work harder than his peers in order excel. But even a casual acquaintance with that bright and amiable gentleman (a gentleman in every meaning of the word) might lead one to see that if his aim is merely the uppermost summit of society, he is falling desperately short of his fullest potential. And who can tell Kelly what his fullest potential should look like except for that voice deep inside himself, as guided by the light of Christ and the Holy Ghost, and only after intense personal reflection?

"None should aim to be better than the rest, but instead we should seek to be better than our best." *This* is the true measure of potential and accomplishment in life. A measure against our own potential is the *only* measure that matters. Anything else is a mere distraction at best, and a divisive weapon at worst. Indeed, it is most often in the quiet solitude which follows a great victory that the pains of insufficiency and dissatisfaction bubble up to the surface of our feelings. How can it be that anyone would feel incomplete after winning an olympic medal, scoring well on a test, selling a business for millions, or even baptizing a fellow brother or sister into the eternal happiness of the Lord? But that is most often what happens, is it not? Achievement does not mark completion as often as it moves us to thirst for greater achievement and effort. The winner of the gold medal comes back for another, regardless of whether (or not) a more challenging opponent is present. The business owner starts another venture despite having all the money he could need for a lifetime. One baptism is found to be, in the end, not enough.

As Marianne Williamson so eloquently put it:

"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? *You are a child of God.* Your playing small does not serve the world. There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. *We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone.* And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we're liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."¹⁴ (emphasis added)

It is this glory of God within each of us that I am seeking to uncover and champion. Society would push each member down, to follow the path of a dumb animal. To quote Charlotte Iserbyt,

"The mind of the average American became "trained" (conditioned) to accept the idea that education exists solely for the purpose of getting a good paying job in the global workforce economy."¹⁵

But what is education if not this? David O. McKay had this to say on the connection between education and profession:

"Education for a livelihood is not the highest purpose of education. '*The fallacious belief,*' writes Dr. Robert M. Hutchins, Chancellor of the University of Chicago, '*that education can in some way contribute to vocational and social success has done more than most things to disrupt American education. What education can do, and perhaps all it can do, is to produce a trained mind.*'"¹⁶

I have good reason to believe that what David O. McKay was referring to when he quoted Dr. Hutchins was the idea of "**schooling**" rather than "**education**", as is evidenced in this next quote:

"A man may possess a profound knowledge of history and mathematics; he may be an authority in psychology, biology, or astronomy; he may know all the discovered truths pertaining to geology and natural science; but if he has not with this knowledge that nobility of soul which prompts him to deal justly with his fellow men, to practice virtue and holiness in personal life, he is not a truly educated man. "***Character is the aim of true education;*** and science, history, and literature are but means used to accomplish the desired end. Character is not the result of chance work but of continuous right thinking and right acting.

"True education seeks, then, to make men and women not only good mathematicians, proficient linguists, profound scientists, or brilliant literary lights, but also honest men, combined with virtue, temperance, and brotherly love-men and women who prize truth, justice, wisdom, benevolence, and self-control as the choicest acquisitions of a successful life.

"True education does not consist merely in the acquiring of a few facts of science, history, literature, or art, but in the development of character. True education awakens a desire to conserve health by keeping the body clean and undefiled. True education trains in self-denial and self-mastery. True education regulates the temper, subdues passion, and makes obedience to social laws and moral order a guiding principle of life. It develops reason and inculcates faith in the living God as the eternal, loving Father of all."¹⁷

If the above is true, then could any of us claim that a nation full of obese, violent, sex-crazed, self-centered, debt-laden, amoral, law-despising citizens are a truly educated people? I would offer a hearty laugh at that notion, if instead I weren't more apt to shudder.

So I repeat, what is education? What should it entail? What should it look like? Who should own a person's education? To what end should that education be aimed? Is it for the betterment of life? For the attainment of a good job? Is it for the benefit of society? Or is the truest purpose of education to guide a soul to eternal life? Do we truly believe that the only real purpose of this life is to return to live *and belong* in the presence of God? If so, why do we push our children to spend 1000% more time in secular learning as they do in personal and theological discovery? How can we blindly give the charge that for every hour they spend in gospel pursuits each week, they must spend ten more in worldly pursuits? Is this what God meant when he instructed "*Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you. Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself*"?¹⁸

And besides, can an education that is free for all be anything more than a merely worthless thing for most? Consider, as Thomas Paine opines,

"What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly; it is dearness only that gives everything its value. I love the man that can smile in trouble, that can gather strength from distress and grow brave by reflection. 'Tis the business of little minds to shrink; but he whose heart is firm, and whose conscience approves his conduct, will pursue his principles unto death."¹⁹

It leads one to ponder upon the true value and benefit of education:

"The notion that an education is of great worth demands that a high price be placed upon it. Not a price in dollars or cents, nor a price paid in subsidy. No, it is only a price of effort, aim, and sacrifice (all of the personal variety) that constitutes a worthy payment for a true education. A student's education is not a glass to be filled, but rather a group of muscles to be exercised. And how futile the presumption of any man who would foolishly attempt to perform the motions necessary to strengthen the muscles of another."²⁰

In closing, I would like to offer an olive branch of sorts, as well as a commitment. I feel a great deal of respect, admiration, appreciation and indebtedness to the Smith family which prohibits me from simply continuing to contend in such a disrespectful way. I've only ever persisted in sharing my personal beliefs because these beliefs are dear to me, and because of a personal fervor to share my perspective on a set of principles which I hoped would bring greater clarity into your own lives. But it is clear now that I am either wildly off-base in my understanding of these principles, or they are still too radical for you to accept. Either way, it is clear the discussion is not welcome, and I do not wish to be the one to sour your minds on what I believe in the deepest part of my soul are correct and eternal principles.

So I commit that I will never broach this topic again in your home, nor will I engage in any rebuttal should the topic arise from the lips of another. I esteem your friendship too highly to allow our differences on this subject to create a rift, if one has not already been created. That said, as this

is likely the most important purpose I could think to undertake in any of my secular pursuits, possibly even as my highest purpose in life, then I must be forthright and say that visits are most likely only when I feel sufficient constitution to avoid sparking or engaging in any debate on the matter of education. As you well know, my passion, once loose, is difficult to cage. A few of you have stated that 'It's one thing to tear down the current compulsory system, but what would replace it?' You should know that I have long felt it my sole purpose to not merely answer that question, but illustrate it in a way that nullifies arguments to the contrary, and to make my mark on the world doing so. I have enough imagination for us both, and I intend not to waste it. Despite the futility which I'm warned awaits me, my aim and focus in this will not change.

One final point: I have laid out an argument (and a series of points to support that argument), articulated to the best of my knowledge and comprehension. Perhaps I am misguided in my understanding of these principles. Perhaps my knowledge is correct but incomplete. Perhaps there is something here that you had not considered, and it serves to enlighten a small portion of your already bright mind. Whatever the case may be, I welcome any discussion of these principles and ideologies at any time, assuming it is for the further understanding of their merit (or the lack thereof if necessary). I am not, however, apt to discuss any further - now or in the future - the virtues of the public school system, or any other system or program (school or otherwise) which heralds compulsion as the central tenet of its theme. My position will stand thus, at the very minimum, until the concepts and ideas above have been sufficiently shown to be theologically and logically bankrupt. Until that time arrives, I see no value in discussing the merits of a system (one which the majority of folks would call broken) in the hopes that such discussion will magically skirt the very issues that condemn it on grounds of principle.

If you've gotten through this entire essay, then I am most impressed, a little surprised, and genuinely grateful. It shows the possibility of mutuality in the great amount of respect I feel for you all. If you aren't able to stomach this entire 9-page thesis at this time, then I can't say I blame you, and congratulate you on the braveness you no doubt summoned in the attempt. I hope most of all that you will not be yet ready to give up on

Your passionate and energetic friend,

Ron Adair Jr.

P.S. Thank you all for being what I consider the epitome of the character to which I have referred in this essay.

Sources:

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