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Research and More Research

Daniel C. Peterson

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RESEARCH AND MORE RESEARCH

Daniel C. Peterson

Abstract: *Young members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have grown up with a plethora of information available to answer the questions they may have about the Gospel. This, in turn, has allowed discordant information to cause concern in many members, ultimately drawing some away from the Gospel. In a recent address to young, married members of the Church in Chicago, President Dallin H. Oaks advised that more research is often not the way to approach these concerns, but rather that members should rely on their faith in Jesus Christ. While many may not agree with this advice, when it comes to questions that will never have a provable answer, particularly of a religious nature, President Oaks's words are correct. Research can never completely replace true faith, only supplement it.*

In our current day when the use of handheld, GPS-enabled devices has virtually supplanted the use of paper maps, it is possible that the following excerpt by Lewis Carroll may be lost on some. The message, though, is important.

“What a useful thing a pocket-map is!” I remarked.

“That’s another thing we’ve learned from *your* Nation,” said Mein Herr, “map-making. But we’ve carried it much further than *you*. What do you consider the *largest* map that would be really useful?”

“About six inches to the mile.”

“Only *six inches*!” exclaimed Mein Herr. “We very soon got to six *yards* to the mile. Then we tried a *hundred* yards to the mile. And then came the grandest idea of all! We actually made a map of the country, on the scale of a *mile to the mile*!”

“Have you used it much?” I enquired.

“It has never been spread out, yet,” said Mein Herr: “the farmers objected: they said it would cover the whole country, and shut out the sunlight! So we now use the country itself, as its own map, and I assure you it does nearly as well.”¹

Young, married Latter-day Saints in Chicago had a notable opportunity on 2 February 2019, when President Dallin H. Oaks, first counselor in the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, passed through the city as a visitor. There was some special meaning in his visit because he had lived in Chicago for a number of years, originally as a student at the highly-ranked law school of the University of Chicago and then, among other things, as a member of that law school’s faculty.

Subsequently, an article appeared in the *Church News* about his remarks, and I found a couple of passages from his speech, as reported in the article, of particular interest:

“Your generation has grown up with an avalanche of information about the history of the Church that is new to many and concerning to some,” he said. “The time-honored principles of relying on and trusting the Lord and His servants are questioned by some.” ... He acknowledged that some Latter-Saint couples face conflicts over important values and priorities. Matters of Church history and doctrinal issues have led some spouses to inactivity. Some spouses wonder how to best go about researching and responding to such issues. “I suggest that research is not the answer,” he said. The Church does offer answers to many familiar questions through its Gospel Topics Essays found at lds.org. “But the best answer to any question that threatens faith is to work to increase faith in the Lord Jesus Christ,” he said. “Conversion to the Lord precedes conversion to the Church. And conversion to the Lord comes through prayer and study and service, furthered by loving patience on the part of spouse and other concerned family members.”²

“Research is not the answer”? Really?

1. Lewis Carroll, *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded* (London: Macmillan, 1893), 169.

2. Jason Swensen, “President Oaks’ advice to young married couples in Chicago on how to tackle faith-threatening questions,” *Church News* (February 4, 2019), <https://www.thechurchnews.com/leaders-and-ministry/2019-02-04/president-oaks-advice-to-young-married-couples-in-chicago-on-how-to-tackle-faith-threatening-questions-48930>.

Some might expect me to disagree with President Oaks's statement. After all, I was deeply involved for many years with the old Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) and its successor, the pre-2012 Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship. And now I'm deeply involved with The Interpreter Foundation. These organizations have focused on fostering faithful research into the scriptures and claims of the Restoration and on publishing the results of that research as widely as possible.

If I didn't believe Gospel-related research and scholarship to be important, I certainly wouldn't have devoted so much of my time and effort to FARMS and Interpreter. And if others didn't believe such scholarship and research to be of great value, those organizations wouldn't have been launched in the first place.

Moreover, I believe that scholarship supplies many reasons to accept and sustain Latter-day Saint faith.

Nevertheless, in the last analysis, I agree with President Oaks. Apart from the most simple and noncontroversial topics, research and scholarly argument will almost always be tentative, inconclusive, reaching probable conclusions and arguing for positions that invite qualifications and counterarguments. What caused the fall of Rome? Who wrote the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*? What are the roles of nature and nurture in human personality? What is the ultimate origin of morality? These and thousands of other such questions have been and continue to be disputed — to say nothing of such far deeper and more essential questions as whether there is a God, whether Jesus really rose from the dead, or whether Joseph Smith was divinely inspired.

And yet, in matters of ultimate concern — religious questions, really, whether one answers them “religiously” or not — decisions must be made. Such decisions are inescapable. Not to decide is, itself, to decide. Moreover, they must be made in the absence of definitive, objective, publicly demonstrable “proof.”

We can research forever. And I think that we *should* do so. In the meanwhile, though, we must live — and life is ticking inescapably away. Moreover, the life of a disciple requires commitment. It's not a never-ending PhD program supported by an inexhaustible scholarship fund. Covenants need to be made or not made, kept or abandoned. Children need to be reared, in faith or without it. Infinite postponement is impossible.

Consider the case of the calling of the ancient apostles Peter, James, John, and Andrew, as it is described in the gospel of Matthew:

And Jesus, walking by the sea of Galilee, saw two brethren, Simon called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea: for they were fishers. And he saith unto them, Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men. And they straightway (εὐθέως) left their nets, and followed him. And going on from thence, he saw other two brethren, James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, in a ship with Zebedee their father, mending their nets; and he called them. And they immediately (εὐθέως) left the ship and their father, and followed him.³

Please note the terms *straightway* (4:20) and *immediately* (4:22). Both of them render the same underlying Greek word (εὐθέως). The New International Version of the Bible translates them, respectively, as *at once* and *immediately*. J. B. Phillips gives them both as *at once*.

The sense is pretty clear. Neither Simon Peter nor Andrew nor James nor John pursued graduate studies in a theological school before responding to Jesus's call. None of them did any library research. They didn't even take the missionary discussions. They heard the call and felt impelled to accept it. εὐθέως. Immediately.

And at what a cost! Their acceptance of the divine call ripped these provincial Galilean fishermen out of the small rural lives they would otherwise have lived and made them figures of international historical importance — but not, necessarily, of international affection. The New Testament itself records that James (or Jacob), the brother of John and a son of Zebedee, was martyred by the sword in Jerusalem around AD 44, at the order of Herod Agrippa.⁴ According to ancient tradition, Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter, died by crucifixion in Achaia, a region of today's Greece. Somewhere around AD 64, Simon Peter was crucified upside down in Rome. John, the brother of James, disappears from history not long after his exile on the island of Patmos, off the coast of modern Turkey.

Shouldn't they have engaged in extensive and rigorous research before making so momentous a choice?

I recently read a book by the always-stimulating Swiss journalist, philosopher, and novelist Dr. Rolf Dobelli that might shed some interesting light on such questions. It's entitled *Die Kunst des klugen Handelns: 52 Irrwege, die Sie besser anderen überlassen* — roughly, in English, *The Art of Smart Action: 52 Wrong Paths that Would Be Better*

3. Matthew 4:18–22.

4. Acts 12:1–2.

Left to Others.⁵ Among the brief chapters of his book is one called “Hast du einen Feind, gib ihm Information” (“If you have an enemy, give him information”).

Dobelli’s brief chapter begins with an allusion to an even briefer 1946 short story by the great Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges, which appears in the form of an invented fragmentary literary forgery. (It may have been inspired by the above passage from Lewis Carroll.) Titled “Del Rigor en la Ciencia” (“On Rigor in Science”), the Borges story, in its entirety, reads as follows:

En aquel Imperio, el Arte de la Cartografía logró tal Perfección que el mapa de una sola Provincia ocupaba toda una Ciudad, y el mapa del Imperio, toda una Provincia. Con el tiempo, estos Mapas Desmesurados no satisficieron y los Colegios de Cartógrafos levantaron un Mapa del Imperio, que tenía el tamaño del Imperio y coincidía puntualmente con él.

Menos Adictas al Estudio de la Cartografía, las Generaciones Siguientes entendieron que ese dilatado Mapa era Inútil y no sin Impiedad lo entregaron a las Inclemencias del Sol y los Inviernos. En los desiertos del Oeste perduran despedazadas Ruinas del Mapa, habitadas por Animales y por Mendigos; en todo el País no hay otra reliquia de las Disciplinas Geográficas.

Suárez Miranda, *Viajes de Varones Prudentes*, Libro Cuarto, Cap. XLV, Lérida, 1658.⁶

Here is an English translation:

In that Empire, the Art of Cartography attained such Perfection that the map of one Province alone took up the whole of a City, and the map of the empire, the whole of a Province. In time, those Unconscionable Maps did not satisfy and the College of Cartographers set up a Map of the Empire which had the size of the Empire itself and coincided with it point by point. Less Addicted to the Study of Cartography, Succeeding Generations understood that this Widespread Map was Useless and not without Impiety they abandoned it to the Inclemencies of the

5. Rolf Dobelli, *Die Kunst des klugen Handelns: 52 Irrwege, die Sie besser anderen überlassen* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2014), 33–35. Translations from Dobelli’s book are mine.

6. Jorge Luis Borges, “Del Rigor en la Ciencia,” Ciudad Seva, accessed March 5, 2019, <https://ciudadseva.com/texto/del-rigor-en-la-ciencia/>.

Sun and the Winters. In the deserts of the West some mangled Ruins of the Map lasted on, inhabited by Animals and Beggars; in the whole Country there are other relics of the Disciplines of Geography.

Suárez Miranda, *Viajes de Varones Prudentes*, Book Four, Chapter XLV, Lérida, 1658.⁷

Dobelli cites the Borges story to illustrate his point: “Borges’s map represents an extreme case of a mistake in reasoning called ‘Information Bias’: The false belief that more information leads automatically to better decisions.”⁸

He illustrates his point, also, with a personal story about searching for a hotel in Berlin. Having looked through a selection of possibilities, he chose one of them on an impression. But then, not trusting his “gut reaction” (*Bauchgefühl*), he did more research. He read dozens of comments, evaluations, and blog entries for a wide range of hotels and clicked through uncounted photos and videos. After two hours of intensive study, he decided on ... the same hotel he had chosen at the very start.

But how about some science? Some real data? Dobelli mentions a study by a researcher named Jonathan Baron. In it, Baron posed the following question to a group of physicians:

A patient is suffering from symptoms that point, with a likelihood of 80%, to Illness A. However, if the patient’s disease *isn’t* Illness A, it is either Illness X or Y. Unfortunately, each of these diseases must be treated in a different way. Each of the three is roughly equally serious, and each potential treatment has similar side effects. As a physician, which of the treatments would you prescribe? Logically, you would bet on Illness A and, accordingly, order up Therapy A.

But now suppose that there is a diagnostic test that will give a positive result in the case of Illness X and a negative result in the case of Illness Y. If, however, the disease in question really is Illness A, half of the test results will come out positive and half will come out negative. Would you, as a physician, recommend that the patient undergo this diagnostic test?

7. Jorge Luis Borges, “On Rigor in Science,” in *Dreamtigers*, trans. Mildred Boyer and Harold Morland (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964), 90.

8. Dobelli, *Die Kunst des klugen Handelns*, 33.

In fact, most of the physicians surveyed by Jonathan Baron, the researcher running the study, recommended the diagnostic test be administered to the patient. And they did so, remarks Dobelli,

even though the information derived thereby is irrelevant. Suppose that the test result is positive. In that case, the probability of Illness A is still much greater than for Illness X. The supplemental information delivered by the test is completely useless for the decision.⁹

In cases where the decisive facts are already on the table, Dobelli argues, “More information is not merely superfluous, it can also be detrimental.”¹⁰ To illustrate this contention, he cites a little experiment conducted by the psychologist Gerd Gigerenzer, of the Max-Planck-Institut für Bildungsforschung in Berlin.

Gigerenzer asked a simple question of students at both the University of Chicago and the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München (i.e., the University of Munich, in Germany): “Which city has more residents, San Diego or San Antonio?”

Of the American students, 62% gave the right answer, “San Diego.” But fully 100% of the German students were able to answer the question correctly. Why? Because German students are so much better than American students, even at the elite University of Chicago? No. Because the German students knew less than the American students did:

All of the German students had at least heard of San Diego, whereas only a few had heard of San Antonio. So they chose the more familiar name. Both cities, however, were known to the Americans. They had more information, and for precisely that reason often chose incorrectly.¹¹

Dobelli closes his chapter with a brief allusion to the Great Recession of 2008. Scores of thousands of government, academic, and private economists — armed with mathematical models and research reports, commentaries and terabytes of data — failed to foresee the financial crisis. When certain knowledge is beyond the reach of human reason, more data and more research isn’t going to give it to us.

9. Ibid., 34.

10. Ibid., 35.

11. Ibid.

Another of Dobelli's chapters is worthy of note in this context. It's entitled "Wann Sie Ihren Kopf ausschalten sollen" ("When you should turn your head off").

There was once, he says, a highly intelligent millipede. It looked from the edge of one table over to another table, where a grain of sugar lay. It began to ponder whether it should descend the right or the left leg of the table on which it sat, and, whether it should ascend the other table by the right leg or the left leg. And should it begin the journey with its own left leg? Or with its right leg? And then, in which order should it move its other legs? The millipede was a skilled mathematician, so it worked its way through all the possible variants. Finally, it decided on the best course — and died of hunger in the very same spot where it had done all its calculations.¹²

And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pith and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry,
And lose the name of action. (Hamlet, 3.1.92–96)

Dobelli tells an interesting story about preferences in strawberry jam. In the 1980s, it seems, *Consumer Reports* had 45 different types of strawberry jam rated by expert "tasters." Some years later, a psychologist by the name of Timothy Wilson did exactly the same thing with his students, and the results were very nearly identical: The students preferred the same varieties of strawberry jam as the experts had.

But that was just the first part of Wilson's experiment. He repeated it with a second group of students. However, this time he had the students fill out a form on which they were to justify their evaluations of the jams in some detail. And, this time, the rankings were completely turned around: Some of the very best types of jam were given the very worst rankings.¹³

"If one thinks *too* much," concludes Dobelli,

one cuts the head off from the wisdom of the feelings, ...
[which] are simply a different way of processing information
than is rational thinking — a more primitive way, but not
necessarily a worse one. In fact, often a better one. ... Thinking
might needlessly sabotage intuitive solutions. The same thing
is true for decisions that already confronted our Stone Age

12. Ibid., 173.

13. Dobelli, *Die Kunst des klugen Handelns*, 174.

ancestors: the evaluation of foods, the choice of friends, or the question of who can be trusted.¹⁴

None of what I'm saying here, I hasten to add, is intended to argue against the value of knowledge or the importance and interest of research. It is, however, intended to suggest that, in matters where ultimate answers are unavailable to human reason — e.g., whether there is a God, whether life has meaning, whether there is a real distinction between good and evil, whether there is a purpose behind the cosmos — additional research really cannot deliver the answers we seek. Where did I come from? Why am I here? Where am I going? No quantity of scientific data and no amount of immersion in the library stacks will settle those questions beyond doubt.

President Oaks is right.

Daniel C. Peterson (*PhD, University of California at Los Angeles*) is a professor of Islamic studies and Arabic at Brigham Young University and is the founder of the University's Middle Eastern Texts Initiative, for which he served as editor-in-chief until mid-August 2013. He has published and spoken extensively on both Islamic and Mormon subjects. Formerly chairman of the board of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) and an officer, editor, and author for its successor organization, the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, his professional work as an Arabist focuses on the Qur'an and on Islamic philosophical theology. He is the author, among other things, of a biography entitled *Muhammad: Prophet of God* (Eerdmans, 2007).

14. Ibid., 174–75.

