



Rex E. Lee speaks at the J. Reuben Clark Law School about 1986. Courtesy Janet Lee.

By Study and Also by Faith

Rex E. Lee

We gain understanding by two processes. I will refer to them as the rational process and the extrarational process.

My theses are that each of these processes plays an important role in our fulfilling that ancient and all-important mandate to "get understanding" (Prov. 4:7), that there is no inherent inconsistency between the two processes, and that our eventual achievement of total perfection will require the use of both processes.

The rational process is the one that you are accustomed to using in your academic work. Its tools should be familiar to all of you: reading, analysis, research, criticism, and, generally, problem resolution by thoughtful inquiry. Properly applied, it is a strenuous, taxing, and frequently frustrating experience.

It is my belief that the difficulties and frustrations of the rational process are inextricably interlaced with the plan of eternal progress and that a principal objective of this plan is to achieve a facility and, eventually, mastery of its use.

At the time that the era of free agency was ushered in, God informed Adam, "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread" (Gen. 3:19). That metaphor has far broader application than the relationship between physical work and the achievement of the necessities of life. Just as hard labor or exercise strengthens our muscles and makes them more useful, so also the hard, frustrating straining of our mental abilities to the point that--symbolically, at least--they ache just as a muscle would ache results in the strengthening of our ability to use these processes. It is not easy to become a great football player, weight lifter, or discus thrower; no one ever achieved

greatness in these endeavors without extensive and continuous sweat of the face. Similarly, no one ever achieved excellence of the mind without really pushing himself or herself. The requisite mental effort is difficult, frustrating, and often tormenting, but it is an inseparable aspect of the law of eternal progress. Only by the sweat of our intellectual faces can we taste the bread of contentment that comes from having successfully challenged and mastered the rational process.

The acquisition of understanding through the rational process takes on a special dimension for members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The restoration of the gospel has provided many of the answers to life's great questions. Since the answers to these questions have come through the only infallible source of knowledge--direct revelation from God--there is no need to resolve them rationally.

Take an example that is of perhaps lesser substantive importance but provides a cogent illustration of the point. I don't smoke tobacco, and I don't drink alcoholic beverages. The question whether I would smoke or drink, even in moderation or on isolated occasions, for the achievement of certain social or business objectives is simply not an open question. The answer to that question has been provided for me by God himself in a revelation given to Joseph Smith, February 27, 1833 (D&C 89:5, 8). For other people, the question whether to smoke or not to smoke involves the kind of balancing of interests that is characteristic of the rational process, weighing such considerations as the probable shortening of life by a decade or so against the delightful smell that tobacco smoke imparts to the clothes of its users.

Similarly, we hear a lot these days to the effect that confining sexual relations to the marriage context is outmoded and society would be better off if this idea were discarded. Much can be said and ought to be said in rational opposition to these suggestions. But you and I, as members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, do not really approach that issue on a rational basis. The Lord has revealed to us that the misuse of our powers of creation is an offense second only to the shedding of innocent blood. That kind of knowledge supersedes any possible conclusions of human beings, no matter how brilliant and no matter how skilled in the use of rational processes.

There are other examples: we baptize by immersion at eight years of age; we meet once a week to partake of the sacrament; we confer the priesthood upon those who qualify at age twelve; and we do vicarious ordinance work for the dead. As to these practices and these beliefs, the rational processes are simply irrelevant. Even if I should conclude that I would be a happier person if I smoked and that the delightful smell on my clothes and the aura of distinction and dignity that surrounds smokers is more important than ten or fifteen years added to my life, I still would not smoke. I don't need to concern myself with whether eight years is really the best age for baptism, or twelve the optimum age to receive the priesthood. These for me are not questions which are subject to the rational process.

From the accepted premise that the gospel provides the complete answer to many of life's great questions, we sometimes make the mistake of assuming that the gospel forecloses from the rational process a rather vast segment of problems which we ought to resolve for ourselves and which, from my understanding of the plan of eternal progress, really require that we resolve for ourselves--issues such as whether I should be a Republican or a Democrat; whether we should have an income tax and, if we do, whether the rate should be progressive; whether our units of local government should fluoridate their water supply; whether we should be selling grain to communist countries; and so on. There are many questions such as these which the discharge of our obligations as American citizens requires us to work out for ourselves by the application of our own intellectual abilities. They are the kinds of issues on which two members of the Church

can reach opposite conclusions without impairing the Church standing of either. And they are the kinds of problems to which, in my view, the law of eternal progress anticipates that we will apply rational processes if we are to achieve the corresponding development.

I turn now to the acquisition of understanding through extrarational processes. The methods are not the same. The results are much surer, though they are not as susceptible to our own control.

For centuries, men have been debating about the nature of God. On occasion, hundreds of the world's best scholars assembled for the purpose of resolving the issue by application of their combined intellectual talents. Out of these centuries of rational effort by the world's finest minds evolved the prevailing Christian concept of God--centuries, if you will, of application of the finest minds in the world to this important question! And yet, in the space of just a few minutes, a boy of fourteen years learned more about the true nature of God than had come from centuries of the best rational effort of the world's best minds. The process was extrarational. It did not depend on study, thought, or contemplative inquiry. It came through revelation, through direct contact between a mortal man and his Father in Heaven.

Joseph Smith's experience is the most outstanding example of extrarational learning that has occurred since the resurrection of the Savior, but it is not the only instance. Though of less dramatic surrounding circumstances, the opportunity is available to every earthly creature to gain understanding through the extrarational process.

Extrarational learning takes a great variety of forms: the quiet, serene confidence of total assurance that can accompany the reading of the scriptures, particularly the Book of Mormon; the ring of truth that is detected upon hearing another person's testimony; the quiet, yet overwhelming inner conviction that the work in which one is engaged is truly the restored kingdom of Jesus Christ. May I share with you a personal experience involving learning by extrarational means.

The experience occurred in a suburb of Mexico City, Colonia Moctezuma. My companion and I had returned on one hot afternoon to discuss what was then the third lesson (dealing with the Restoration) with a widow and her daughters. The first two lessons had been rather sterile and innocuous. We had been treated with courtesy but not much interest, and frankly, I was somewhat surprised that we had been invited back the third time. The Restoration lesson is distinctive in its almost complete reliance on individual testimony. At least as we were presenting it at that time, there were practically no scriptural references. By that time, we had already explained the need for apostles and prophets and the fact that these had been taken from the earth in ancient times. The Restoration lesson consisted simply of recounting the contacts that had been made between heaven and earth during the restoration period, and then bearing our testimonies that we knew that these things had really happened.

The third visit with this family started out much as the two preceding ones. And then, something happened that I will remember as long as I live. I began to recount the restoration of the Aaronic Priesthood, how it was that John the Baptist had appeared to the Prophet Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery, laid his hands upon their heads, and restored the lesser priesthood. As I began to speak, the thought occurred to me: This is really true. The same man who baptized the Savior himself and cried repentance in the wilderness really did come to this earth, some eighteen centuries later, and actually laid his hands upon the heads of Joseph and Oliver, bringing to the earth once again the authority to do what he himself had done in the meridian of time--perform the foundational ordinance of baptism. As this overwhelming impression came over me--that what I was saying was really true--I could tell that I was conveying the same

impression to the members of that family. And the means of conveyance was not just the spoken word. The words that were coming from my mouth were not materially different from the words that I had spoken on hundreds of prior occasions. And yet I could tell that this same impression, this realization of truth which I was personally finding so compelling, was also being conveyed to this widow and her daughters. I had witnessed a manifestation of that great principle articulated by the prophet Nephi, that "when a man speaketh by the power of the Holy Ghost the power of the Holy Ghost carrieth it unto the hearts of the children of men" (2 Ne. 33:1). Before I finished speaking and before any of the family members had expressed their own impressions, I knew that conversion had occurred. I knew that these people knew that John the Baptist on May 15, 1829, had personally made a visitation to this earth and that his visitation was one integral part of the restoration of the kingdom of God. I knew that from that point forward it was only a matter of time until the family would be baptized. And this is in fact what happened.

Having examined briefly some of the essential characteristics of each of these processes, let us turn now to some of the basic relationships between the two. Two great learning processes: What are their interrelationships? Or are there any?

First, of the two methods, the extrarational gives the surer results. It does not follow, however, that anyone who has had hands laid on his head and been given the promise of the constant companionship of the Holy Ghost, contingent on his worthiness, has no need to apply his mental skills to acquire learning. No matter how righteous you are, no matter how carefully you cultivate the companionship of the Holy Ghost, there are vast amounts of knowledge which you need to acquire and which you are not going to receive through revelation. The great plan of eternal progress anticipates our growth and development through use of our mental skills, the kind of progress that can come only through the strenuous application of our reasoning abilities.

Second, there occasionally exists the tendency among those who achieve proficiency in either of these processes to downplay the importance of the other. There is a corollary tendency to assume that excellence in the use of one of these methods forecloses the need to develop excellence in the other. The oft-repeated observation that "we have something that no one else has" is undeniably true. But the fact that we have the gospel should not be used as an excuse to fail to do the very thing that the gospel commands, to expand our knowledge of all truth. The eighty-eighth section of the Doctrine and Covenants is explicit on this point. It does not enjoin us to seek learning "either by study or by faith." Neither does it state that "if ye have achieved learning by faith, ye are thereby permanently exempted from study." Rather, the commandment is to obtain learning and to obtain it both "by study and also by faith" (D&C 88:118). And I say to you that no man is truly learned whose learning experiences exclude either the rational or the extrarational method.

Again, the experience of the Prophet is instructive. Unquestionably, his was the prime example of extrarational learning by a mortal. It is interesting, and in my view significant, that his was an experience that was preceded by extensive rational effort as well as prayer. Similarly, the famous instruction given by the Lord to Oliver Cowdery in the ninth section of the Doctrine and Covenants--and through Oliver Cowdery to all of us--involves a combination of the two processes: "You must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore, you shall feel that it is right" (D&C 9:8).

We should be both scholarly and spiritual, and we should discard any notion that there is any inconsistency in the two methods. The true intellectual is one whose intellect is sufficiently developed that he recognizes not only the great potential, but also the limitations of his

intellectual capacity. Conversely, there is no need for the person who has acquired understanding through spiritual insights to be suspicious of those who acquire learning by study. The scriptural mandate is that both processes be used. The most learned people I know--and there are many of them--are people who find no inconsistency between study and faith and who have achieved a proficiency in each. We should feel equally at home in the academy and in the chapel; we should recognize each as a center of learning. We know that the day will come when the lamb will lie down with the lion. We need not await the Millennium for the scholar to be a patriarch and the patriarch to be a scholar.

Third and finally, I have expressed the view that there is no inconsistency between the rational method and the extrarational method. This does not mean that the conclusions reached by each of these methods will always be consistent. Indeed, it is almost inevitable that there will be some instances in which the rational method will lead us to some conclusion--not many, but some--which is at odds with what we know to be true because it has been revealed from God. Now what do you do when you encounter such instances? (And I reiterate: encounter is almost inevitable.) The answer is not to stop struggling with the matter on a rational level. But we must recognize that our rational processes, marvelous as they are, have limited capabilities. Therefore, the underlying approach must be that in those few instances in which we find disparity between the conclusions reached by our rational and extrarational processes, the extrarational must prevail. We must recognize that in those few instances the seeming inconsistency is attributable to the fallible nature of our rational capacity. The answer is not to stop the rational struggle with the problem, but rather to recognize the fallible nature of the rational process, the infallible nature of the extrarational process, and the inescapable conclusion that where inconsistencies in results occur--until such time that they can be reconciled--it is the extrarational that must prevail.

The inadequacies of my own mental abilities were impressed upon me early in life. As a young boy growing up, I would gaze from my perch on a sawmill into the clear, starry night, unable to comprehend what was out there. My Sunday School teacher told me that space is without end. My brain was unable then, and is still unable, to comprehend that fact. I simply lack the capacity to perceive how it is that space can continue on and on and never come to an end. And yet my mind is sufficiently developed to comprehend that the alternative is totally unacceptable. If there is some point out there where it all comes to an end, then what is on the other side? These questions concerning space and their equally perplexing counterparts relating to time supply the most cogent examples of which I am aware, and other examples give me a rational basis for my conclusion that in those few instances in which the rational and extrarational processes yield inconsistent results, we must rely on the extrarational.

This address was given to the J. Reuben Clark Law School about 1982, when Rex E. Lee was Solicitor General of the United States. He was the founding dean of the law school and served as president of Brigham Young University from 1989 to 1995.