MY ART AND THE GOSPEL

(a talk given at a fireside in Alpine, Utah, 10 August 2025)

Brigham Young is rumored to have said "If I were placed on a desert island and given the task of civilizing the natives, I would straightway build a theatre for the purpose." I think people have supposed he meant that fine artists might parachute onto the island, stand on the stage, and spout uplifting and enlightening poetry and song at the savages, thus teaching and taming them. That can work. But having spouted from many stages (some of them savagely primitive), I'm convinced that the most direct way to achieve civilization is to send the fine artists home and put the natives onstage.

When I was a kid, I rode the crest of the folk-music craze of the sixties. I wrote on the blackboards of my high school the slogan "Folksingers rule!" festooned with quick sketches of Martin guitars and Vega banjos. When Bob Dylan (just echoing Woody Guthrie) made it okay for folksingers to write their own songs, I jumped in with a passion. It was a kind of music that demanded meaning. You couldn't just go on writing "I met you at the dance and our love is gonna last for weeks." Inherent in the genre was the supposition that you wrote because you had something to say, rather than merely something to sell. To most people in 1963, this was a new idea.

So. What to say? For the first couple of years (ages fifteen and sixteen) what I really had to say was "I met you at the dance and our love is gonna last for weeks." But even at seventeen, that sentiment began to thin. My dad solved it for me. My dad, who had a sterling silver character and a wooden ear, whose only musical expression was the continual whistling of whimsical little tunes that never lasted longer than four seconds–my dad, who slept blissfully through endless high school choral concerts, awaking for my solos–my dad, who would never for a moment consider buying me a surfboard, but who saw a Mexican 12-string guitar in a store window on the way home from work and thought it would be something I'd like–my dad, who sheltered me from all danger and evil, but took me prowling through the dangerous and evil pawn shops around Fifth and Main in L.A. when I wanted a good old banjo, began to notice that there was an indefinable earnestness and power in what I brought to the music I was playing. He said, "Son, why don't you write songs that will teach the Gospel?" It only took a moment for me to realize that that's what I really longed to do: let shine something that I felt flickering inside. (Jeremiah had written "...his word was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones.") The savage was being civilized.

Let's jump from history to method. To articulate your feelings, you have to go beyond feeling them–you have to observe them. To observe them, you have to go outside them and

create a little world around them that will both make sense of them and provide contrast and color and conflict that will bring them into focus for an audience. This is the making of real songs. And it civilizes the maker. Any audience that has gathered for higher purposes than to feel the beat and see the lasers will be touched and bonded as these tokens of light are passed back and forth. This is also called teaching. This organization of light and testimony acts out what the composer Igor Stravinsky recognized as "the need that we feel to bring order out of chaos, to extricate the straight line of our operation from the tangle of possibilities and the indecision of vague thoughts."

This helps make art out of what you're feeling. Then you can invite people to listen without appealing primarily to their kindness and patience or the fact that they're your family or roomates. If you can manage to add praise of the Lord, and inspire it in your audience, you're inviting the Spirit to your performance as well. The Psalmist said, "Thou art holy, O thou that inhabitest the praises of Israel."

The tricky part, of course, is staying "clear" so the Spirit may use you. In the first days of my career as what the second edition of The New Era Magazine called a "Mormon Troubadour" I wrestled mightily with the issue of priestcraft, which is the business of being paid to bear your testimony. Three realizations clarified things a lot. First, it was never my testimony that was for sale. It was the art. If I couldn't say something in the art, I couldn't say it from the stage. The mere words, "I feel the Spirit right now, do you?" were not allowed outside a song. "I love you," yes, but "I feel the Spirit," no. Afterward by the stage door, maybe–if it was to someone I knew. Art invites audience members to choose and trust their responses. Unadorned testimony demands a very specific kind of attention and response that's not at home in the theatre. That's why artists put their truth into the mouths of characters. (And in concert every song is a play and the singer a character or storyteller.) That "aesthetic distance" is essential to art.

The second realization was that I don't represent anybody but myself. Especially not the church. I have a little certificate that identifies me in flowing calligraphy as a representative of the church, signed personally and beautifully by David O. McKay. I cherish that little piece of paper. At the bottom it says, in very unflowing plain type, "Expires October 1969," when my mission in Australia was finished. And since I don't represent the church anymore (outside my calling or the families to which I minister), I can't borrow authority from it or demand attention because I'm singing about it.

The third realization is that nothing I create can ever be as beautiful as what it's designed to remind people of, which is the Grace of God. Let me try to capture this idea in a picture. Imagine the artist as a window, through which all those he serves may see into the beauty that lies beyond these dark walls of discouragement and drudgery and even death. To do any good, the artist attends to two things: "framing," which is the choosing and composition of the spiritual

landscape the audience hungers to see, and "polishing the glass," so that when the audience comes to the window their eyes aren't distracted by smudges or smears. This polishing is as much an artistic challenge as a moral one, because weak or wierd art choices can smear and obscure their view of the "beauty beyond" as badly as if the audience (or the Spirit) finds out we are hucksters or hypocrites.

You simply can't choose early in your life to take your gifts seriously and then write a few hundred songs and a few dozen scripts and act every year in a couple of plays and several film projects and eagerly say "Yes" to every opportunity your home stake and ward offers you to magnify those gifts without the Holy Ghost steadily and quietly turning on lights in your mind and whispering words in your ear. And some of the best work is so entirely for others that you hardly feel it yourself. While directing an original Book of Mormon play in my stake, I testified to my cast that I felt I had been an instrument in the hand of the Spirit, sometimes cutting cleanly as a scalpel, sometimes striking surely as a hammer, but feeling little more than would these tools. After singing a solo in church, I never really know how it went, just like after a Priesthood blessing when you wonder what you said.

My songs have always been more about wanting than having, more about faith than assurance, more about the reach than the grab, more about the trail than the arrival. I sing of summits, but from a distance. That doesn't mean the songs are joyless. Quite the contrary. C.S. Lewis described joy as "a stab of desire" for someplace mysterious and beautiful, that yet feels somehow like home. It may be an inescapable consequence of growing up that the universe of the genuinely unknown yawns wider and deeper with each passing year. But it's scattered with veils of light and vast wheels of glory. Longing for that light makes me feel like something inside me belongs to it, and that possibility gives me great joy. Still, I feel with Flaubert that "None of us can ever express the exact measure of his needs or his thoughts or his sorrows; and human speech is like a cracked kettle on which we tap crude rhythms for bears to dance to, while we long to make music that will melt stars..."

And I remember that the Light of Christ can melt them–and make them, tame them and teach them to sing.