

Mormon Laundry List

Julianna Gardner Berry

Mormons love telling each other what to do more than any group I know.

When we meet up together at that great regional conference in the sky and the Lord reviews our collective performance at keeping the commandments, I think that he, unlike most of us, will start with our strengths and congratulate us for observing, to a man [person] and to a fault, the injunction to “give your language to exhortation continually” (D&C 23:7).

I call it the Mormon Laundry List, and I can smell it coming from afar. It’s lengthy. It’s itemized. It leaves no spiritual stone unturned. And it worms its admonishing way into unsuspecting talks and lessons the whole Church over.

Earnest teachers and sacrament meeting speakers ask the riveting question, “What can we do to improve our ___ ?” (Fill in the blank: faith, hope, charity, skin tone, net worth, etc.) The answers could be recited in unison like the Young Women’s theme: (1) Pray. (2) Read your scriptures. (3) Attend your meetings. (4) Do your home or visiting teaching. (5) Pay your tithing. (6) Attend the temple. (7) Magnify your callings. (8) Serve others. And then the catch-all, which all but renders the list meaningless—and certainly unattainable: (9) Keep the commandments.

The Laundry List is amazingly versatile. In it lies the solution to all of life’s problems. Overcoming addiction. Strengthening your marriage. Eliminating debt. Becoming more Christlike. Following the prophet. Making home a haven. Finding kindred dead. Living well on lentils.

Sometimes the Laundry List is puzzlingly recursive. What can we do to improve our prayers? Pray, read scriptures, attend meetings. What can we do to improve our scripture study? Pray, read scriptures, attend meetings. And so on.

I grant that the Laundry List contains life practices that make a spiri-

tual journey possible. But I find it amusing at best, dull mostly, and often patronizing that this is all my fellow Saints have to say from the pulpit. I'm looking for more education and edification in the bread I'm fed at church. I'm looking for someone to offer me their honest thoughts, a serving of the good word of God, and a taste of the fruit of God's love.

Do we need a weekly flogging with instructions? Will those who falter be buoyed up by a roster of requirements? God evidently trusts us more than we trust each other to "work out [our] own salvation with fear and trembling" (Morm. 9:27). Is our prevailing sense of one another that we're all so wayward we can't get past the remedial course?

Lest I be misunderstood, I feel the tedious need to explain that I'm a card-carrying, calling-filling, sacrament-taking, choir-singing member of the Church, one who is more or less up-to-date with her laundry.

Though Mormons have always loved to admonish, I sense that the Laundry List has become more entrenched in the last decade, as talks are prepared in Microsoft Word, with the benefit of bulleted lists. Our many MBAs, trained in presentation skills, believe that all knowledge can be conveyed through PowerPoint. I cringe when sacrament meeting speakers emphasize their "takeaway message" or when missionary-themed conversations include the word "branding."

In a larger cultural context, the impact of technology on language is partly to blame. Mass communication that isn't pure tabloid has become technical writing, a slick how-to manual. Estate planning, quality parenting, weight loss, and cholesterol reduction can all be achieved in three easy steps. Why not, then, our eternal salvation? Except we need more than three steps, and no one can say they're easy.

Our scriptural canon is so broad and our theology so lofty that we should have no shortage of pure doctrine for an eternity of talks and lessons, with exhortation trimmed to a minimum. Inspire me with scriptural examples but spare me to-do lists. General Authorities can admonish all they like. It's their job. And perhaps youth and children need it in industrial-strength doses. But for me, please, air your laundry elsewhere.

But there I go, telling Mormons what to do.