Towards a Mission, minus the statement
by Eric R. Samuelsen

At a family reunion over Christmas, I was sitting in my parents' living room, when my youngest brother asked with an eager glint in his eye if I'd seen a recent email from our other brother. I feigned ignorance, because I knew where this was heading. The brother in question wanted us all to write personal mission statements; he had, and he challenged all the rest of the family–his children, my folks, my brother and his family, me and my family–to write ours too. This summer, he said, we could all gather together at Lake Powell, and read each others' mission statements. We could critique them. We could offer suggestions. (Since I was the family writer, I would be particularly helpful here.) We could turn it into a sort of family meeting. We could hone and craft them. We could make goals relating to them. It was just going to be loads of fun.

My eighteen-year-old stared at me in a kind of mute agony, as his uncle excitedly laid out this scheme for us. A summer, on Lake Powell, on a houseboat, but not skiing or swimming, but sitting in the cabin working on mission statements. We weren't going to be doing this, were we, his eyes pleaded? Or, more to the point, I wasn't going to make him do this, was I?

I am, in most respects, the family oddball–not a businessman like a sensible person, not outdoorsy, never in a bishopric, a blankety blank intellectual for Pete's sake, what's worse, a Democrat. And so, not wanting to spill wind from the sails of the Samuelsen family schooner, I tried to find the right words politely to decline. Everything I said sounded like the sorts of things I'd say when the Jehovah's Witnesses come knocking, or, if we weren't Mormons, Mormons. We're not interested, I'm afraid. It's just sort of not us. Thanks but no thanks. But inside, behind my polite smile, I could hear myself screaming:

"A mission statement! Adverb-laden, content-free, a literary belly-button–everyone has one, but to what purpose? The rhetorical equivalent of a Professional Smile: the mouth is open, but nothing touches the eyes. Impenetrable verbal sludge, odious, obfuscatory language, newspeak and doubletalk: in short, bad writing. As Don Watson once wrote about mission statements: "grammar is not the problem. To work on the grammar is like treating a man for dandruff when he suffers from gangrene."(45)

And yet, can my brothers really be blamed? Aren't mission statements ubiquitous in our culture? Can we go anywhere without encountering them? Isn't that what we do in America, proactively initiate, synergistically leverage, globally facilitate, seamlessly integrate value-added, diverse, performance based, market-driven, cutting edge, high-payoff, low-risk high-yield, principle-centered, interdependent, seven-habits-conforming, resource-leveling infrastructures, or deliverables, or methods of empowerment, or paradigms? Going forward?

I thought of entire faculty meetings devoted to our departmental mission statement. Hours of my life, I think. Hours: the plays I could have written, the symphonies I could have composed, the diseases I could have found cures for. And for what? To what end? To reassure whoever was fool enough to read the thing that we "were committed to assist individuals in their quest for perfection and eternal life." That's how our department mission statement begins: apparently we've abandoned theatre as an art form, we're all about exaltation. But note the past tense–'we were committed', the implication being that at some point in our past we sought human perfection, but had to give it up as a bad job. Or maybe not; like everyone else at BYU, we've devised curricula that're "spiritually strengthening, intellectually enlarging, and character building, leading to lifelong learning and service." We go on to offer some platitudes about

literacy and spirituality, and then we apparently felt the need to define those terms: we helpfully suggest that "Literacy means for us the ability to "read"---that is, to apply the vocabulary and grammar of theatre and media arts to uncover multiple meanings in works of art, and appreciate, evaluate, and respond to them." Spirituality consists, not of fasting, pondering, praying, no, but "discovering, exploring, and balancing the interrelationships among the individual, others, and Deity." As for creativity, it means "synthesizing in new ways, and illuminating human understanding through performance and production." I can see it now: "Johnny, your acting in that scene didn't really synthesize in new ways. Try it again."

My department is chock-fulla virtue. We stand for apple pie, motherhood, and "generosity of soul." We have "a service orientation"–possibly involving kittens caught in trees--and apparently–since this one word gets its very own bullet point--we have a major collective jones for, "awareness."

From time to time in faculty meeting, someone–it's actually almost always the same colleague–will ask if something someone's proposed is "congruent with our mission statement." This always stops the meeting dead in its tracks, because of course none of us has any idea. No one's read our mission statement for years, except perhaps for parents desperate for some consolation since their child has chosen to major in theatre at BYU. That's what they're for, of course, public relations, not actually defining who we are and what we're about, but reassuring outsiders that we're nothing too awful, and that we're not about anything too scary. But why should we faculty ever refer to our mission statement? It's mental creamed wheat, into which someone has stirred a soupçon of strained spirituality, and some mashed up banalities.

The clinic where our family doctor shares a practice with several other doctors has a mission statement prominently displayed on the wall by the reception desk. It's full of noble, stirring sentiments, but does have this one minor deficiency, in that it nowhere suggests that this group of doctors see their profession as involving in any way the accurate diagnosis and effective treatment of disease. I'm all for 'treating our clients with dignity and respect," but if I'm there for professional purposes involving say, chills and a fever of 103, I'll forgo the self-respect. Not hard, since I will be, after all, wearing a hospital gown. I mostly just want to not die. Would it be so hard for them to say that their mission is basically to help sick people get better?

But that one's just sort of comically irrelevant. Mission statements generally are used to obfuscate, to befuddle, to becloud. One company's mission statement invoked the Golden rule, declaring "We treat others as we would like to be treated ourselves....We do not tolerate abusive or disrespectful treatment. Ruthlessness, callousness and arrogance don't belong here." The prose is clearer than in most mission statements, but we may found ourselves regarding it with some skepticism, since that one's from Enron. Here are two mission statements from the CIA: "Establish and maintain a partnership with our clients for long-term relationships." And "we hold ourselves—and each other—to the highest standards. We embrace personal accountability. We reflect on our performance and learn from that reflection." Lofty sentiments, both, but which came from the US Central Intelligence Agency, and which from Custard Insurance Adjusters?

Sometimes mission statements conceal even grimmer realities. What is 'arbeit macht frei" but a kind of mission statement dredged from the depths of hell? George Orwell's 1946 essay, "Politics and the English language" warned us of the potential for language to function as a tool for totalitarian ideologies. But when Orwell got specific, providing samples of debased and obscure political talk, his bad examples strike us today as models of clarity and insight. Being bi-partisan here, how are we to respond in our current climate? Okay, 'the audacity of hope's a neat phrase, but then that same speaker repeats the word 'change' as a mantra, urging us

to chant along with him: 'yes we can.' Or, as President Bush helpfully paraphrased his Lord and Savior, "We must all hear the universal call to like your neighbor just like you like to be liked yourself." And Orwell's world hadn't yet reached the extreme satirized so brilliantly by former Czech dissident-turned-President Vaclav Havel in his play *The Memorandum*, in which one Josef Gross, the inventor of a new bureaucratic language called Ptydepe finds himself arrested by the authorities. His language is simply too perfect–not just mostly, but *completely* incomprehensible. He must be hiding something.

There is something not just vaguely but overtly authoritarian about corporate mission statements. Scott Adams, creator of the comic strip Dilbert has on his website, a random mission statement generator. I used it earlier in this paper, to create gibberish. I understand the need for public relations, but really, if the corporate world wanted to be honest about its intentions, wouldn't every big company essentially have the same mission statement: "We intend to make as much money as we possibly can, without us going to jail." And that's not an illegitimate thing to want to do. If I buy stock in a company, I want to know that that company is full of industriously greedy capitalists. It'd be nice if they also treated people decently, but as an investor, that's not my central concern.

Who came up with the idea of mission statements anyway? I darkly suspect Covey, but I don't know, because I haven't read any Covey and would sooner face the gallows than start. But clearly mission statements are only a smaller part of a larger task. Having written our mission statements, we formulate goals. My brothers have over a hundred, culled from their mission statements. But a goal's just a wish without implementation. We then are to set smaller goals, implementing the larger goals, we create instruments through which implementation can be assessed. And after assessment comes alignment, further goal refinement, a revision of the original mission statement, leading to more goals, and continued assessment. As the Primary hymn puts it, "We are as the army of Sisyphus, we have been taught in our youth."

Mission statements lead to goals, and goals lead–I shudder to say it, the word itself conveys such blandly unending torment: assessment. Like Scotch thistle, spurge or Dyer's Woad, a stubborn, noxious, pesticide-resistant weed called assessment has been infesting the gardens of academia for the past seven years or so. On the surface, it appears harmless enough–we want to know if students are learning what we're trying to teach them. Fair enough. But the impenetrable prose of assessment gives the game away; this is pedagogical corporatization writ large. When 'knowledge' is turned into 'learning outcomes,' a test becomes an 'assessment tool,' a teacher becomes a 'learning facilitator,' we can be sure that Dorothy has strayed very far indeed from Kansas. I teach at a university, not a 'dynamic culture of assessment committed to a process of data-informed continuous improvement." I want to teach good students, and research, and write.

The real danger with this entire process, from Mission statement to outcome identification to the creation of assessment instruments and rubrics and outcome realignment strategies is not that it's so Orwellian and oppressive, though I doubt I could find ten colleagues at the entire university who don't find it both those things. It's that they're funny. Again, the prose gives it away: assessment documents are unreadable, because what they're trying to accomplish is impossible. Assessment is like Gertrude Stein's description of Oakland–there's no there there. How can you quantify magic? How can you assess outcomes for alchemy? How can something as wonderfully mysterious and subversive and ineffable, like good teaching, or good literature, or art, be contained, measured, described, objectives defined and aligned with core competencies? So of course the prose describing assessment is banal and lifeless and flat.

Dracula always leaves his victims bloodless, because Dracula isn't alive. He's merely undead. And as authors from Sesame Street to Christopher Moore to Stephanie Meyer have shown, vampires aren't just scary. They're also absurdly funny.

But, as I sat in my parents' living room, wondering how to get out of Lake Powell Mission Statement hell, I didn't so much rage silently as chuckle inwardly. The whole thing seemed comical--self-improvement through self-definition, inevitably turning to self-limitation, really, how could it not? I felt like I felt when I first heard of that great work of American unintentional comedy, the best-selling self-help book *The Secret*, which says that if we just think about wealth really really hard, our thoughts, which are electrical impulses after all, will magnetize, and through a process of Quantum Physics, attract money to us.

And yet, under the comedy I still felt some indignation. Why should I waste a family vacation writing, and helping everyone else write, a mission statement? I go on vacation to avoid faculty meeting, not to look for another one. Mission statements are useless, and some are hypocritical, and many are just flat lies. If mission statements are such a great idea, I thought, then the Lord God himself would have written one.

Oops.

"For this is my work and my glory, to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man."

And yes, darn it, yes, that would seem to be, can frankly only be seen as, a mission statement.

But what a mission statement. Two minutes after Moses has ruefully admitted that mankind is as nothing, which thing he had never supposed, the Lord reveals a wider perspective. We are as nothing–we humans, God knows us intimately, our puny ambitions, our inflated egos, our hypocrisies and petty cruelties and meanness of soul. But He also knows what we can become. And, no, He's not 'committed' to helping us get there. His work, his glory is our exaltation.

The theme of this conference is the Scriptures as literature, and so let's parse the Lord's mission statement a little more closely. Note that bringing about eternal life for us all is his 'work.' And certainly a great deal of labor must be involved, nine billion years worth, to get orbs spinning and stars igniting and primordial soups a-stirring. But work also implies a work of art, a work of literature. We are God's art form. And sometimes we think to create works of art back at Him, Bach's B-minor mass and the Sistine chapel ceiling and the Salt Lake temple. My dear friend Marvin Payne says he thinks of the Timpanogos temple from time to time as a kind of drawing pinned to Elohim's refrigerator by a magnet. Of course, He's delighted with it, just as we are with the masterworks on our fridges. What the Lord is too polite to mention is that the mountain the temple stands in front of is one of His minor pieces. Marvin says he imagines the Lord looking at our offering of a temple and saying 'why that's just lovely! Aren't you clever?' And He's even tactful enough to use exactly the same delighted tone of voice when the temple we're showing off so proudly is the one in Provo.

"My work, and my glory." Glory, in this sentence, we rather gloss over, or conflate with work, or if we define it at all, we say something like 'when we attain exaltation, God's glory increases. This suggests heaven as a kind of celestial Amway–when we do good, the guy above does good too. But glory suggests something else; possibly even an *inessential* resplendence or beauty or magnificence, something spectacular added to the merely functional. God's work is salvic melody–God's glory is harmony and orchestration and counterpoint and ornamentation; not just the notes perfectly played, but notes felt and interpreted. He could just sing our

salvation. But He's also bringing the back-up singers and the band.

When it falls to us to describe ourselves, we're far too terrified to reveal ourselves so nakedly, or so optimistically. And so, we resort to false optimism, to loftiness, to self-deception and pretense. Most earthly mission statements are good subjects for satire, because the prose in which they were written is not just dead, but stinking and bloated with gas. All prose reveals more than we intend for it, and mission statements, as the perfect expression of human petty vanity, tend to reveal precisely what we would rather they concealed. What my department's mission statement reveals, for example, is not that we genuinely strive to put the exaltation of our students first, though we do care about our kids, but that we, as a community of LDS artists, are terrified. We fear that we'll be perceived as unfaithful. And so our protestations of orthodoxy have a desperate edge. We feel threatened, and see our position as tenuous: we're vulnerable; we could lose our jobs. So we foreground faith: 'we are too righteous! We do so believe in the gospel!"

Our fears do have a basis too: we have learned from sad experience that a single letter from an offended patron sent to certain senior apostles can lead to unpleasant conversations with higher-ups; we're not all that trusted by the powers that be. So we define "to "read" as: "to apply the vocabulary and grammar of theatre and media arts to uncover multiple meanings in works of art," because we think it protects us. See! Works of art have multiple meanings! You saw our play, and thought it questioned faith in God, or dismissed the Word of Wisdom, or urged young people to fornicate, but that's not the only possible meaning! It doesn't say those bad things! You focused on the wrong meaning! And so, Enron, a company founded on the values of ruthlessness, callousness and arrogance, declares that an opposition to those vices is central to its corporate mission. And the CIA's leadership wants us to know that they reflect on their mistakes, and makes changes based on those reflections. One certainly hopes so.

But the Lord's mission statement is just nineteen words long, and written in a prose not just clear, but deeply evocative. Moses 1: 39 has rhythm and cadence, the parallelisms neatly expressed: work and glory, immortality and eternal life. And a human being wrote that; inspired, to be sure, by the power of the Holy Spirit, but he was one of us. We can put into words something like a revelation. But to do that, we need a measure of grace.

Even mission statements can read well. Even a literary form as fundamentally vapid and pedestrian as mission statements can be couched in language that soars and inspires. And if even mission statements have not just spiritual but also literary potential, then language really can do anything.

In the past year or so, I've found myself wondering what the mission of AML might be, what the mission statement for Mormon letters would look like. Not, of course, that I intend to write one, Moses 1:39 notwithstanding. My objections to the form, and more significantly, my objections to the way the form functions in our culture still incline me towards obstinacy. So what if we're the only non-profit on God's green earth without a mission statement. Let the mission statement of AML be like the British constitution–all the more flexible and compelling for not having been written down.

No, what Moses 1:39 really teaches us literati is not that we actually do all need mission statements, but that all forms of literature, even the most corporatized and commodified, have value and potential. Is it possible to write a profound and important limerick? A poet named Joel Ash has written four books of genuinely poetic limericks. Is it possible to write a literary comic book? Do you know the graphic novels of Frank Miller or Alan Moore?

Our mission statement, if we had one, would invoke not Covey, but Saul of Tarsus. "The

eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee: nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you. What we believe in, what we honor, is good writing: literature, and the effective criticism of literature. Because we're the Association for Mormon Letters, we honor good writing by and about Mormons. But the poet cannot say to the playwright, we have no need of thee, nor again the essayist to the romance novelist, I have no need of thee. We can certainly discuss, with precision, kindness and insight, how a particular work functions in our culture, or the effectiveness of the prose or any other matter relating to what a particular work seems to be trying to achieve and how well it achieves it. We value criticism. What we can't do is excommunicate any genre or approach or style or form. Mormon literature can be transcendent or transgressive, or both, or neither. We embrace it all.

If I could eradicate one element from all Mormon culture, it would be our habit of declaring works of art morally suspect. The email campaigns against movies like The Golden Compass, the seminary lessons in which teachers urge students to burn wordly CDs, the whispered suggestion that thus and such LDS artist has gone inactive, so be sure to avoid his latest movie or concert, above all, the assumption that artists and writers aren't quite trustworthy, and that tends to corrupt, so approach with caution and suspicion; how can such actions and attitudes really reflect the open inclusiveness of the Thirteenth article of faith? If there is anything virtuous lovely, or of good report, or praiseworthy, we seek after these things. So if we had a mission statement, it would assert that Literature is testimony. It's a writer telling us what the world looks like from where he's standing, or even better, imagining how it would look if he were standing somewhere else. And it's pretty much always good.

Recently I came across some sobering statistics. Last year, the mainstream studios and production companies that comprise what we refer to as Hollywood released around 300 films, grossing approximately two and half billion dollars. The porn industry released around 6000 titles, grossing around four and a half billion. Count every penny Americans spent in concert halls, museums, live theaters and all other performing arts, add to it money spent in art galleries, and purchasing classical music CDs, in other words count every dollar spent by Americans on what we might call high art, and its dwarfed by the amount Americans spent in strip clubs. PT Barnum may have said 'no one ever went broke underestimating the taste of the American people." I would paraphrase that, no one ever went broke underestimating the taste of American men for commodified misogyny.

That, friends, is the enemy. Pornography, and related industries devoted to the degradation of women, that's the enemy, not a Philip Pullman movie with really cool polar bears. And it may be naive of me to say this, but I believe it in my heart: art and literature are the antidote. Pornography bears the same resemblance to art as crack bears to penicillin, but art can be the penicillin for an addiction to pornography. Porn fundamentally anesthetizes us from intimacy, it erodes and degrades the human imagination, it distances us from life itself. Porn's basically cowardly. Not so literature, which even at its worst marches into battle with a kind of gallant foolishness. It takes courage to write even a bad book, courage and determination and invention. Even writers who aren't very skilled do something astonishingly revelatory. We can even see the face of God in bad novels.

And so, if we had a mission statement, it would celebrate genuine human creativity, celebrate even that celebration of life found in books that are dark or edgy or uncomfortable. Or naively optimistic or sentimental. For the fan of Levi Peterson's novels really cannot say to Anita Stansfield lovers, I have no need of thee. Nor Dave Wolverton fans to Stephanie Meyers' readership, I have no need of thee. We can surely say, 'that novel wasn't effective when . . . "

good criticism is always essential. And surely literature has moral implications worth exploring critically. But let's be critics, not referees. On our court, there is no out of bounds.

I'm calling for more inclusiveness, in a paper that started out by dismissing mission statements as meretricious rubbish. But my larger point is that if even mission statements can be profound so can any other literary form. And if language, and the skilled use of language by genuine craftspeople can accomplish that, then there's nothing that's beyond our capabilities. As Glen Hansard, winner of an Academy Award for best song put it in his acceptance speech: "make art! Make art!" That'll do for a mission statement, at least until something better comes along.