As a Man Thinketh

Elder Spencer W. Kimball
Quorum of the Twelve Apostles

From The Miracle of Forgiveness (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1969) pp. 103-115

... Filthy dreamers defile the flesh ...
-- Jude 8
Thoughts are the seeds of acts.

Akin to sins of omission are “thought sins.” we learn from one of the proverbs: “For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he.” (Prov. 23:7.)

Thoughts Shape Our Lives
A man is literally what he thinks, his character being the complete sum of all his thoughts. On this theme Henry Van Dyke gave us the following verse:

Thoughts Are Things

I hold it true that thoughts are things;
They’re endowed with bodies and breath and wings;
And that we send them forth to fill
The world with good results, or ill.

That which we call our secret thought
Speeds forth to earth’s remotest spot,
Leaving its blessings or its woes
Like tracks behind it as it goes.

We build our future, thought by thought,
For good or ill, yet know it not.
Yet, so the universe was wrought.
Thought is another name for fate;
Choose, then, thy destiny and wait.
For love brings love and hate brings hate.

Not only does a person become what he thinks, but often he comes to look like it. If he worships the God of War, hard lines tend to develop on his countenance. If he worships the God of Lust, dissipation will mark his features. If he worships the God of Peace and Truth, serenity will crown his visage. A thoughtful poet gave us this:

A human face I love to view
   And trace the passions of the soul;
On it the spirit writes anew
   Each thought and feeling on a scroll.

There the mind its evil doings tells,
   And there its noblest deeds do speak;
Just as the ringing of the bells
   Proclaims a knell or wedding feast.-- Author unknown

Inescapably we reap what we sow. If a farmer wants to raise wheat he must sow wheat, if he wishes fruit he must plant fruit trees, and so with any other crop. The principle is equally binding in the mental and spiritual spheres, as James Allen has expressed it in his well-known book, As a Man Thinketh.

As the plant springs from, and could not be without the seed, so every act of a man springs from the hidden seeds of thought, and could not have appeared without them. This applies equally to those acts called “spontaneous” and “unpremeditated” as to those which are deliberately executed. . . .

In the armory of thought [man] forges the weapons by which he destroys himself; he also fashions the tools with which he builds for himself heavenly mansions of joy and strength and peace.... Between these two extremes are all grades of character, and man is their maker and master.... Man is the master of thought, the moulder of character, and the maker and shaper of condition, environment and destiny.

Cumulative Effect of Thoughts
This relationship of character to thought cannot be too strongly emphasized. How could a person possibly become what he is not thinking? Nor is any thought, when persistently entertained, too small to have its effect. The “divinity that shapes our ends” is indeed in ourselves. It is one’s very self. In speaking of carving out a character, President David O. McKay has said:

Your tools are your ideals. The thought in your mind at this moment is contributing, however infinitesimally, almost imperceptibly to the shaping of your soul, even to the lineaments of your countenance.
even passing and idle thoughts leave their impression. Trees that can withstand the hurricane, sometimes yield to destroying pests that can scarcely be seen except with the aid of a microscope. Likewise, the greatest foes of the individual are not always the glaring evils of humanity but subtle influences of thought and of continual association with companions.

The cumulative effect of our thinking, and its power over life’s circumstances, is strikingly expressed by James Allen:

A man does not come to the almshouse or the jail by the tyranny of fate or circumstance, but by the pathway of grovelling thoughts and base desires. Nor does a pure-minded man fall suddenly into crime by stress of mere external force; the criminal thought had long been secretly fostered in the heart, and the hour of opportunity revealed its gathered power. Circumstance does not make the man; it reveals him to himself. No such conditions can exist as descending into vice and its attendant sufferings apart from vicious inclinations, or ascending into virtue and its pure happiness without the continued cultivation of virtuous aspirations, and man, therefore, as the lord and master of his thoughts is the maker of himself, the shaper and author of environment.

Let a man radically alter his thoughts and he will be astonished at the rapid transformation it will effect in the material conditions of his life. Men imagine that thought can be kept secret, but it cannot; it rapidly crystallizes into habit and habit solidifies into circumstance.

This “solidifying into circumstance” is the key to most of the success stories we read. The successful man thinks he can. As someone expressed it briefly and pointedly, “Whether you think you can or you can’t, you’re right.” Allen enlarges on this idea:

He who cherishes a beautiful vision, a lofty ideal in his heart, will one day realize it. Columbus cherished a vision of another world, and he discovered it; Copernicus fostered the vision of a multiplicity of worlds and a wider universe, and he revealed it; Buddha beheld the vision of a spiritual world of stainless beauty and perfect peace, and he entered into it.

Thoughts Govern Acts and Attitudes

The statement, “As a man thinketh, so is he,” could equally well be rendered “As a man thinketh, so does he.” If one thinks it long enough he is likely to do it. A minister acquaintance of mine, whom I knew rather well, was found by his wife hanging in the attic from the rafters. His thoughts had taken his life. He had become morose and despondent for two or more years. Certainly he had not come to suicide in a moment, for he had been a happy, pleasant person as I had known him. It must have been a long decline, ever steeper, controllable by him at first and perhaps out of hand as he neared the end of the trail. No one in his “right mind,” and especially if he has an understanding of the gospel, will permit himself to arrive at this “point of no return.”

Not only acts but attitudes rest on the thoughts we feed our minds. A young couple bickered and quarreled until their marriage was ended and divorce was final. They had been involved romantically with another erring couple. The man and the woman both wrote me, trying to smooth out the wrinkles and to make me feel justified and reconciled to their false conclusions. I acknowledged their letters in these terms:

Old man rationalization finally has convinced two basically good people that “evil is good, and good evil,” and threads are now broken and solemn contracts are voided and solemn promises are abrogated when minds became incubators in which little thoughts grew to become vicious thoughts, and small acts of impropriety become near unforgivable acts affecting adversely the lives of four adults and many children. You have fallen in step with the world which seems intent on believing that good is evil and evil is good, and that black is white and darkness is light.

Our Thoughts Influence Others

No one has a right arbitrarily to shape the thoughts of others, but that is not to say that one’s thoughts are entirely his own affair. Each of us inevitably affects others by the character his thoughts and actions have shaped. Each of us is part of mankind and gives to others as well as receives from them. One perceptive comment, whose authorship I do not know, expressed it in this way:

Into the hands of every individual is given a marvelous power for good or evil the silent, unconscious, unseen influence of his life. This is simply the constant radiation of what man really is, not what he pretends to be. . . . Life is a state of constant radiation and absorption; to exist is to radiate; to exist is to be the recipient of radiation.

Man cannot escape for one moment from this radiation of his character, this constant weakening or strengthening of others. He cannot evade the responsibility by saying it is an unconscious influence. He can select the qualities that he will
Accountability for Our Thoughts

Thus far we have considered mainly the effect thoughts have on our life here. But what of the hereafter? When I was about fourteen years of age I read the Bible through. It was a long, arduous task for me but I finished it with a degree of pride. When I read that all men would be judged according to their works, that seemed plausible and I thought I must mind my actions and my works. Then I read what the Savior said to the people of Palestine.

. . . Every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment.
For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned. (Matt. 12:36-37.)

This seemed to me far-fetched, for when I “cussed” the cows which struck me in the eyes with their cocklebur-matted tails or kicked over the milk bucket, I looked around and there was not a single soul in the corral to hear me; and though the cow could hear, perhaps she could not interpret. And when I quarreled with my brothers out in the field, I was sure there were no other ears within many blocks. How then could one be judged by his words?

That was bad enough but there was worse to follow, for I later read in the Book of Mormon the words of a prophet saying that even our thoughts will condemn us.

. . . Our words will condemn us, yea, all our works will condemn us . . . and our thoughts will also condemn us; and in this awful state we shall not dare to look up to our God. . . . (Al. 12:14.)

It is well for all of us to realize that our thought sins as well as all other sins are recorded in heaven. Modern revelation gives us this:

Nevertheless, ye are blessed, for the testimony which ye have borne is recorded in heaven for the angels to look upon; and they rejoice over you, and your sins are forgiven you. (D&C 62:3.)

And this:

For verily the voice of the Lord is unto all men, and there is none to escape; and there is no eye that shall not see, neither ear that shall not hear, neither heart that shall not be penetrated. (D&C 1:2.)

If men’s secret acts shall be revealed it is likely that their secret thoughts will also be revealed, for the iniquities of the rebellious shall be spoken from the housetops.

The one who harbors evil thoughts sometimes feels safe in the conviction that these thoughts are unknown to others and that they, like acts in the dark, are not discernible. The Revelator, John, seemed to clear this matter when he wrote:

And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works. (Rev. 20:12.)

And in the last days an angel will “sound his trump, and reveal the secret acts of men, and the thoughts and intents of their hearts.” (D&C 88:109.) Accordingly, men’s deeds and thoughts must be recorded in heaven, and recording angels will not fail to make complete recordings of our thoughts and actions. We pay our tithing and the bishop records it in his book and gives us a receipt. But even if the entry fails to get in the ward record, we shall have full credit for the tithes we paid. There will be no omissions in the heavenly records, and they will all be available at the day of judgment. President John Taylor emphasized this:

Man sleeps the sleep of death, but the spirit lives where the record of his deeds is kept.
Man sleeps for a time in the grave, and by and by he rises again from the dead and goes to judgment; and then the secret thoughts of all men are revealed before him with whom we have to do; we cannot hide them; it would be in vain then for a man to say, “I did not do so and so”; the command would be, unravel and read the record which he has made of himself and let it testify in relation to these things, and all could gaze upon it. [Journal of Discourses, 2: 78-79]

At that day we may be sure that we shall receive fair judgment. The judges will have the facts as they may be played back from our own records, and our voices and the pictures of our acts and the recordings of our thoughts will testify against and for us.

President J. Reuben Clark gave sober attention to this thought:

But there is one whom you do not deceive, and that is Christ, our Lord. He knows all. Personally, I have felt that nobody need keep much of a record about me, except what I keep myself in my mind, which is a part of my spirit. I often question in my
mind, whether it is going to require very many witnesses in addition to my own wrongdoing.

Perhaps sometime all of us have felt that we were misjudged and that our sincere and well-intentioned efforts were not understood. How comforting it is to know that on judgment day we shall be treated fairly and justly and in the light of the total, true picture and the discernment of the Judge!

**Nothing Secret to God**

There are no corners so dark, no deserts so uninhabited, no canyons so remote, no automobiles so hidden, no homes so tight and shut in but that the all-seeing One can penetrate and observe. The faithful have always known this. The doubters should take a sober look at the situation in the light of the electronic devices which have come into increasing use in the last few years and which are often delicate and tiny but so powerful as almost to annihilate man’s personal privacy.

These devices can apparently be used to reveal actions and even to tap thoughts. The lie detector is almost commonplace. Dreams are analyzed. Wire tapping has come prominently into use. A certain paint has been used as a conductor of electricity. A tiny outlet has been used as a conductor of electricity. A tiny outlet can pick up anything said in a room. Transmitters are built into picture frames, door knobs, typewriters, clocks, and other things. A palm-size direction microphone with a similar power of discernment and perception comes to men as they become perfect and the impediments which obstruct spiritual vision are dissolved. For example, Ananias and Sapphira (see Acts 5:1-10) secretly conspired to lie to God, but Peter was impressed to read their thoughts. There are many examples of this power, both ancient and modern. A story came down to my family about my grandfather, Heber C. Kimball. I repeat it as it was told to me:

Being in charge of the Endowment House, while the Temple was in the process of construction, Heber C. Kimball met with a group who were planning to enter the temple for ordinance work. He felt impressed that some were not worthy to go into the temple, and he suggested first that if any present were not worthy, they might retire. No one responding, he said that there were some present who should not proceed through the temple because of unworthiness and he wished they would leave so the company could proceed. It was quiet as death and no one moved nor responded. A third time he spoke, saying that there were two people present who were in adultery, and if they did not leave he would call out their names. Two people walked out and the company continued on
through the temple.

Men of God are entitled to this discernment.

The Savior’s Word on Thought Sins

Of vital interest to us is the interpretation of the Lord with regard to the sins of thought. His great sermons toward the beginning of his ministry revealed a new concept. He had been the author of the law under which the children of Israel had lived. He now seemed to hope that his people might begin to live the higher laws. At least, he felt to expound them and urged the people to observe them. He recalled the lower law and followed with the higher:

Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill.
But I say unto you, that whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. . . . (Matt. 5:21-22.)

The killing is an act of aggression. But anger is a thought sin. It may be the forerunner of murder. But if one’s thoughts do not get vicious nor violent he is unlikely to take life.

Again, Jesus spoke of the practice of “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,” and came forward with the higher law:

. . . Whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also.” (Matt. 5:39.)

This would be very difficult to do and it is the response of a man well on his way to perfection, but the rightness of it is apparent. To retaliate and fight back is human, but to accept indignities as did the Lord is divine. In advance, he was possibly anticipating the time when he himself would be tested; when he would permit himself to be kissed by a known traitor yet not resist; when he would be captured by a vicious mob yet not permit his loyal Apostle Peter to defend him, though Peter apparently was willing to die fighting for him.

A similar idea is involved in this contrast of the lower and higher laws:

Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy.
But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you. (Matt. 5:43-44.)

Then we have the moral laws. The Lord remembered the profligacy and wantonness and bestiality of the days of old against which such strict laws were enacted. Perhaps in that day, if one could refrain from actual physical adultery he had been accounted quite righteous, but now came the higher law:

Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery:
But I say unto you, that whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart. (Matt. 5:27-28.)

The thought that stirred the look that provoked the lust was evil in its beginning. To want, to desire, to crave -- that is to lust. So when the thought is born which starts a chain reaction, a sin has already been committed. If the thought is sown, then develops into lust, it is almost certain to bring eventually the full harvest of the act of the heinous sin, adultery. Note that the term lust has other connotations in addition to the sexual one.

Murder is generally thought of as premeditated killing, and certainly no such act was ever completed unless the thought had preceded the action. No one ever robbed a bank until he had “cased” it, planned the robbery and considered the “getaway.” Likewise adultery is not the result of a single thought. There first is a deterioration of thinking. Many sinful chain-thoughts have been coursing through the offender’s mind before the physical sin is committed.

Yes, as a man thinketh, so does he. If he thinks it long enough he is likely to do it, whether it be theft, moral sin, or suicide. Thus the time to protect against the calamity is when the thought begins to shape itself. Destroy the seed and the plant will never grow.

Man alone, of all creatures of earth, can change his thought pattern and become the architect of his destiny.

Avoid the Initial Motivation

A graphic example of this came to my attention some years ago. In a community in the North, I visited a man occasionally who had above the desk in his printing establishment a huge picture of a nude woman. He laughed at the idea of its being destructive to his morals. But one day years later he came to me with a stained soul he had committed adultery. His house had fallen in on him. Certainly the thoughts provoked by the things always before his eyes must have had a deteriorating effect on him. There may have been other factors, but surely this one played its part.

We would all be well advised to avoid the motivation to the evil thought. If persistently resisted it will “get the message” and stay away. When I was in
business in Arizona, the calendar salesman came each year and we always bought calendars and gave them to customers as advertising. The first year the salesman spread out on the desk: large, colored pictures of scantily clad girls, glamorous but shocking. We pushed them all aside and chose scenes, landscapes, and elevating pictures. In all the years following, that salesman never brought to me out of his car another suggestive picture.

**Think Virtuous Thoughts**

I came across the following sentence whose authorship I do not know:

> A famous artist said he would never allow himself to look at an inferior drawing or painting, to do anything low or demoralizing, lest familiarity with it should taint his own ideal and thus be communicated to his brush.

It would be well for each of us to observe the same principle, lest the tainting of his ideal be communicated to his eternal soul. Accordingly, let our thoughts rest upon sacred things.

> . . . Let virtue garnish thy thoughts unceasingly; then shall thy confidence wax strong in the presence of God; and the doctrine of the priesthood shall distil upon thy soul as the dews from heaven. (D&C 121:45. Italics added.)

President McKay likes to quote the following:

> Sow a thought, reap an act;
> Sow an act, reap a habit;
> Sow a habit, reap a character;
> Sow a character, reap an eternal destiny.

Such is the power -- and the outcome -- of our thoughts.