

Sayso or Sense

Eileen G. Kump*

Amy Gordon was to have a new house, and in a frenzy of neighborliness folks came to tell Israel how to build it. Neighbors who shared work horses and yeast starts freely shared their wisdom. "If I were you, Brother Gordon—"

Too excited and pleased to do otherwise, the Gordons listened well; then after supper they separated the wheat from the chaff and fortified themselves for another day. Israel told Amy, "It's your house, within reason." Reason meant whatever the bank would loan a man with an excellent reputation and fair collateral. She was therefore careful with her dreaming: It would be a simple, strong house with plenty of room and one or two of those up-to-date advantages.

When Israel's father arrived—suitcase in hand—Amy showed him a cot in the children's room. "For as long as you will stay," she said. "Lola begs to sleep on the floor and she will have her wish."

"Thank you, Amy dear."

There were tears in the old man's eyes as Amy kissed him on the cheek. "We need you."

"I thought we would lay foundation today," he said, folding back his shirt cuffs.

Amy smiled and put her arm through his as they walked outside. "Oh, we're not ready for foundation, Grandpa. We've lots to do first." Sixty years experience, she thought. Sixty years head start. She watched him go, thankful in her heart for his strong back and, yes, even for his knowhow. What they did not want of it they could manage a piece at a time. The neighbors had given them plenty of practice.

*Mrs. Ferrell Kump is a housewife and mother in St. Joseph, Missouri, where her husband is a professor of education. She has written and published widely.

But what are a few weeks of practice against a lifetime? Amy turned from her sewing and saw Israel and Grandpa, side by side, announcing before she was even aware of their presence that she did not want what she knew she wanted. In Israel's eyes was the zeal of a convert and in Grandpa's the patient kindness a good man shows the child found in error.

"You don't want a basement, Amy dear," said Grandpa.

How could she reply? Despite his size—he was six inches shorter than Israel—Grandpa had in his wide back energy for a full day's labor, in his hands the craftsman's skill. Worse, he had one of those rich, prophetic voices some of the Church leaders had, voices that didn't need to shout. And he had an iron gray mustache.

Amy looked at him and at the son who thought his father was Moses and wondered whether to go down fighting.

"Israel says it won't cost much more than an extra room upstairs, Grandpa. I do want a basement."

"Amy, Amy, Amy," Grandpa's voice gradually softened, but it was the softening voice of intensity, not argument. "You don't want one of those—those dugouts on this fine property!" He walked to the window. "What a fine corner lot! My—"

"But it wouldn't be a dugout, Grandpa. We'll have cement. It would be cool—and beautiful!"

"Amy." Grandpa came and put his arm around her shoulders. Still, he was not arguing. Still, his voice did not waver. "Amy, you need to be reminded that your own father—and I've known him all my life—was born in a cave on the side of a hill. I've heard him tell of it, how his pa dug that hole with his own two hands. But your pa never called it a house! It was a place to exist until a house could be built on top of the ground where a house ought to be. Do you think your pa didn't build that house as fast as he could?"

"Grandpa, there are no snakes here!"

He laughed without impatience. "I'm not talking of snakes, my dear. Why, an upstairs is heaven—and closer to heaven, too!" He smiled, his voice jolly and nostalgic at the same time. "My, but the mornings that come back to me out of an attic room with an east window. My, my—"

He was off into thought, as always, absolutely right, absolutely unmovable. But was he right? Amy looked at Israel for an answer but saw only Mosaic adoration.

"You promised me, Israel. We thought about a basement together."

"I know it, and we're not going to do anything you won't allow. But Pa has built a lot of houses."

"And now he's building ours?"

It was an unkind thing to say. No one in southern Utah could build a better house. But her basement! She had felt its coolness, imagined the baby asleep there while she canned away August. She had already dug it with her bare hands!

Now Grandpa was rolling his sleeves all the way up, the matter settled. Of course it had been settled when he rode up with his suitcase. Amy would not have her basement. She would not have whatever Grandpa in a lifetime of experience had not found to be good. She could see her house now, just like Grandma Nellie's, with a steaming upstairs and deck porches the width of the house on both floors.

A carpenter came and Amy sent him to join the adversary. She tried to keep away from the window so she would not have to watch them bury forever her undug basement. Could she do as much? Could she bury her anger and never mention basements again as long as she lived? She could try. What did she really know about them anyway? A picture, a comment, things that wouldn't cover the head of a pin beside Grandpa's knowhow. She scolded herself, unselfishly took all the blame for troubling the waters, and hoped for an extended peace, hoped that Lola had not outgrown that old whim of hers about sleeping on the floor.

By the time the foundation was laid and the plans were completed, Amy had given up her ample closets: "Can't you see that they would encourage the foolish acquiring of clothing? Remove temptation. Be frugal and simple, my dear." She had also changed her mind about wanting deeper, more gradual stairs: "A waste of space, daughter. Up is up." But these submissions were trifling. Amy began to suspect male judgment in any form. If Israel said, "Bedtime," she got to looking at the clock, even if she was having difficulty keeping her eyes open. When he called on one of the children to say family prayer—no matter who it was—she knelt there wondering whose turn he had overlooked. But the thing that finally shattered her faith in men, the thing that finally made Grandpa an old man with old-fashioned ideas, was the problem

of which direction the house ought to face. Only it was not a problem to Amy. She had never for one second seen it as a matter that needed deciding until she overheard the men talking.

"Will the house look west or south, Brother Gordon?" asked the carpenter.

Grandpa was silent, and silence made Amy uneasy. West. To the main road of course. To the west!

"How fortunate to be on a corner lot and have a choice." Grandpa sounded really grateful. "By all means," he said, "the main entrance should be on the south."

South? Amy looked over at Grandpa and in a tight, slow voice said, "Why don't you put it on the roof?"

"What was that, Amy dear?" asked Grandpa.

"I'm sorry, Grandpa. I was being foolish. I thought I heard you say that the house was to face south."

"By all means."

Amy sat down and picked up her mending, but her trembling hands would not sew. She had been patient. She had been agreeable. Sometimes she had been right. And all those times floated back, giving her strength.

"By *what* means, Grandpa? By *what* means? Why south?" She stood and went to the door. South she saw the cemetery, the narrowing road where it curved into the desert. South she saw one house: the shanty where Watermelon Joe lived.

"Look south! Look!"

"The town is going to grow Amy. Someday the main part of town will be out there."

"It will?"

"It will."

"But, Grandpa! The school, the church house, the store, the people! They're all north! The whole state is north!" She looked at Israel. "Don't let him!" Back to Grandpa. "What isn't north, Grandpa? Name one thing that isn't north!"

The carpenter filled the silence. "That's just it, Sister Gordon. North is all filled up. North is utilized, fully utilized."

"That's why a south front would be nonsense. Don't you see? Everyone who comes, including our children and ourselves, including you, Grandpa, on your way from Willow Flat, comes from the north." She sat down again. "My garden and

kitchen are on the north. Folks will spy the back door and they will come right in. Who will walk clear around the house just to get in right? Everyone will come through my kitchen—the bishop, the Relief Society sisters, the apostles!”

Amy was sure she had been convincing. She would forgive Grandpa his momentary blindness. After all, he had built most of his houses where there were no main streets to consider. She smiled at him and he smiled back.

“This decision is very important. You will live here for the rest of your lives.” It was an observation, not a rebuttal.

“That’s true, Grandpa.”

“You will likely never move again. You ought to be content.”

Sometimes she loved that voice.

“Yes, Grandpa. You do see.” Perhaps he *was* a Moses.

“And when the town grows south—”

Amy felt her cheeks flame. Had he heard one word?

“When the town grows south, a west entrance will be a daily annoyance, a daily reminder of lack of foresight. When the—”

“When! When! When!” She was sure she would cry. “And when the town does not grow south, I will have a daily annoyance that will drive me out of my mind!” She ran from the room, abandoning the men to their visions. She could see the town through her tears, snuggled against the graveyard, the rattling homestead, the barren fringe of desert. She would *not* submit!

But that night she had a dream. God was conducting priesthood meeting and Grandpa and Israel and the carpenter were on the front row, hanging on every word. God said when they came to earth, men could have their choice—sayso or sense—but they couldn’t have both because that wouldn’t be fair to the women. He called a vote and Grandpa’s hand shot up for sayso before God had finished speaking. Amy awoke, sure the choice had been unanimous. By daylight she had decided that, God approving, she had no alternative but to leave the men to their folly.

After breakfast she made her speech. “The front door should face west, main street. It should be easy and logical to get to from the north. Or the south. My mind is the same as it was last night. However, I gave up my basement, which

would have been cool and beautiful, and I gave up my vain closets and wasteful stairway. I will now give up having my front door on the front of the house."

"Amy, Amy, Amy."

"I don't want to talk about it any more."

They left her, their stomachs full, their minds undoubtedly troubled that she did not see. Perhaps Israel reminded his pa that it was Amy's house after all. But Amy never even hoped it. She let herself be mad inside whenever she wanted to and she watched them build her house the way they wanted to. She never let on what she had dreamed or how much she hurt inside. When they built her a coolroom with several inches of cobble rock underneath the cement floor and with sawdust between the studding in all the walls, she showed them her pleasure. Inwardly she marvelled at how the men in her dream could go about building such a fine coolroom without her objections.

But to nurture such sarcasm made Amy uneasy. It was wrong for a woman. When the house was finished, the pictures hung, the rooms moved into, she was pleased, and she longed to have once more her sturdy faith in Israel, that trust that made obedience beautiful. She longed to feel again that the priesthood could actually carry the burdens without throwing the world into chaos.

When the time came to dedicate the new house to the Lord's care, Israel relinquished his right and asked Grandpa to offer the prayer. Amy hid her unsightly wash boiler and such things as usually hang beside a back door, and on Sunday afternoon Grandpa and a radiant band of friends and neighbors filed in through the kitchen. They arranged themselves in the parlor.

As Grandpa began to pray, Amy's heart churned for a miracle. She had to have it! "Father, we dedicate into Thy watch-care and keeping this beautiful home." *Oh Father, it is beautiful, it's beautiful regardless!* "Bless this good family. Thou knowest the intents of their hearts are righteous, Father." *Thou knowest how men are, Father. Help me to take no delight in their folly.* "Bless every comfortable room, bless every child who grows there. Bless the timbers that the elements—" *Bless me never to mention my basement again. Remove bitterness, doubt—* "Within these walls let Thy Holy Spirit abide in peace always, we pray Thee, in Christ's name, Amen." *In peace. In peace. Oh, please! Amen.*

Amy sank into a chair. Not until Grandpa came over and looked into her eyes and took her hands between his own did she realize she was still crying.

"Thank you, Grandpa."

"I'm sorry everybody invaded the woman's realm by tracking through the kitchen, Amy dear, but please don't cry."

She cried harder.

"My, my, Amy. It's only a house," he said.

Amy's eyes were suddenly dry. She looked up at the old man.

"Of course, Amy. A wordly convenience. Trivia is trivia and must remain so in a world of sorrow."

Amy's heart quieted after that. Oh, there were setbacks. The President of the Church himself walked through her kitchen once during soap making, and one cold Saturday night the Relief Society sisters almost stumbled over Israel sitting before the oven door in the bathing tub. There may even have been another time or two when Amy came so near telling Israel her dream that she trembled. But she kept it. Trivia is trivia. Besides, how could a dream matter to Israel when it made less and less sense to her.