Personal Essay

Spiritual "Reddyness"

Thomas W. Draper

My professional and spiritual identities were nurtured by a home that had its share of troubled water. Some of the trouble percolated from the inevitable miscombinations of a blended family; some flowed from children with difficult personalities. My family's strong commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ made my parents, both of whom valued intellect, unwilling to make their reasoning or anyone else's the final arbiter of life's goodness. I was grateful for my parents' reservations about reason, for their hesitation left a space for our family to be continually called back to Christ, where we could find the only redemption of our faults that could have worked. Kierkegaard's message, while perhaps overstated, is still worth attending to. Sometimes we simply must be *out of our minds*—separate from reason—if we are to be for Christ.[1]

My father, fifty-five when I was born, was a perpetual Gospel Doctrine teacher and a self-educated judge in northern Utah County. He gave me an appreciation for both the high value and the inherent weaknesses in set principles. Night after night, my father would hold court in the room below my bedroom, discussing the law in unsophisticated terms with those who thought they knew better than the law. Occasionally, as with the slight man who had double-parked so that he would not have to carry his polio-stricken daughter so far in his arms, my father agreed with the breach. But most of the time, he did not condone lawbreaking. Yet he taught that nothing short of disobedience to a direct and personal command of God was inherently wrong.

Although my father did not condone lawbreaking, he often went beyond the strict legal code in sentencing transgressors. His maximum fine was $299/*or*. The *or*s in his sentencing made available to my father a powerful alternative to simple punishment, a

means of gently calling people to repentance: "$299 *or* go to church with your family for six weeks," "*or* join Alcoholics Anonymous," "*or* have prayer with your wife," "*or* read the four Gospels and come back and discuss them." The *or*s were used judiciously—only with those my father thought could be benefited by the choice. He once sentenced a local church official, who had been speeding over the Point of the Mountain, to pay $299 *or* discuss the Twelfth Article of Faith with him. The brother got the message and not only discussed the article, but also spoke on "obeying, honoring, and sustaining the law" in the next conference. Judicious *or*s offered as alternatives to rigidly specified fines were an important part of the good my father was able to do in our small community. He understood that Alma's injunction to "judge righteously" (Alma 41:14) was to be seen not as a commandment to be insufferably correct, according to code in everything, but rather as an injunction to let the prior goodness of charity infuse all of his judgments, even when he erred.

My father was interested in building a better community. He knew that at times strict interpretation of the law would have to bend, knew even that occasionally the truth itself would have to wait until there was sufficient virtue in the hearts of people to sustain it. From my father, I learned about the sensitive relationship between truth and progression. Truth requires not only correct content, but also a correct occasion. A truth stated out of place or time is no truth at all. My father's views of timing, preparation, and charity led him to caution people who wanted to express what was on their minds without regard to whom, how, or where. My father was concerned about the effects of harsh realities on those who were unprepared to hear them. While he was capable of arguing fine points of scripture, philosophy, or law with the best of debaters, he was always aware of who was listening. He worried about offending the "little ones." Those who were given gifts of intelligence or knowledge bore a special obligation to share but to share only so fast and so far as goodness would allow.

My father's regard for the growth and care of "little ones" attracted me to stage theories of child development as an area of professional study. In the developing child, progression is often discontinuous rather than linear. One awareness must build upon

another, and all progress must await readiness. Children need time and space to make mistakes. For example, certain grammatical errors occur in the speech of almost every child during the course of development. The well-known sequence followed by most preschool children from saying *feet* to saying *foots* reflects a progression of inward understanding rather than a regression.[2] The observation that a developing individual may be going forward when she appears to be going backward is an important insight from developmental psychology, worth considering when contemplating all forms of progression. Undue concern with errors and small missteps, demanding perfection for its own sake and too soon, too often, puts development, whether intellectual or spiritual, in jeopardy.

My own experience illustrates my father's lessons about the need to be open to a goodness beyond strictness in order to make the most of the discontinuities of progression. Many steps of my developmental journey have been departures from the place of parental love followed by returns to a familiar place that is never the same. One such odyssey took place the year after I returned from my mission in the East Central States.

As a child, I was raised on Primary tales about voices, voices like the one that commanded Wilford Woodruff to move his wagon in the late night away from the place a tree fell before morning.[3] I longed to hear such voices. I wondered why Heavenly Father didn't just make the tree fall a different way or inspire Brother Woodruff to park his wagon under some other tree in the first place, but I wanted to hear voices, too. And at times I heard voices, often stern, present, knowing voices telling me to do good things. "Take out the garbage without being asked," I was told one time when I was thirteen. I obeyed. The next morning a big truck came, and men with large arms took away the refuse I had left in the barrel on the street the night before. I longed for something more dramatic.

Occasionally, something more dramatic turned up. "Tract this street," I was told as a senior companion in McMinnville, Tennessee. So my companion and I did. And there we met Brother Moleksen, who listened to three discussions and told us two interesting stories about looking for oil in South America. Then he gave up and invited us not to come back. I accepted this experience as

one of Brother Moleksen's important chances at eternity. If he chose not to accept it, the inspiration still stood, unchallenged and unchallengeable.

I heard a variety of knowing voices. I obeyed when convenient. Many good things happened, many that were obviously beyond anything I deserved. But I longed for something more sensational. After a particularly stirring lecture in a BYU religion class, I set out with a new resolve to end the unworthiness that had kept the spiritually dramatic from me. I resolved to obey all of the voices. Filled with determination, I climbed into my red 1964 Dodge with no front grill and set out from Provo for my part-time job reading meters for Utah Power and Light in Salt Lake City.

I got no farther than Eighth North in Orem when I came upon what appeared to be my first opportunity for spiritual heroics. To one side of the road, I noticed an elderly woman who looked like she needed help, leaning awkwardly across the hood of her car. I quickly pulled over and hopped out of the car, resplendent in my polyester, perma-press shirt with Reddy Kilowatt on the left pocket and my viridescent cowboy neckerchief. The woman, surprised to be intruded upon, pulled herself upright, revealing a sketchbook and partially completed pencil drawing of Mt. Timpanogos. Both somewhat embarrassed, we got into our cars and drove off. It was hard for me to tell if goodness had been served in that exchange, but I knew that art had been interrupted. And I knew from my mother that, generally speaking, the interruption of art was not a good thing.

Next, thinking I felt heroic guidance, I turned off Interstate 15, without knowing why, at the American Fork exit. "Where am I going?" I thought to myself. Wherever it was, it seemed right. After about ten minutes of driving, I ended up in the parking lot at the American Fork State Training School. Standing there looking at the giant replica of Swiss cheese on the playground, I had to admit that I really didn't know what I was doing. The only thing I was sure of was that if I continued to move in the wrong direction I would be much later than usual for work. I turned around and drove back to the interstate.

Back northbound on I-15, I felt bad that I had not been listening better. Perhaps I had been making up my own mind and

calling it inspiration—perhaps out of ego. My results had been unsure at best and certainly not heroic. I resolved to listen with keener ears.

Outside Lehi I finally heard it. A clear, knowing voice.

"Stop the car," it said.

I stopped.

"Get out of the car and cross that fence."

This is crazy, I thought, as I looked out at the six-foot, chain link freeway fence. It would take one of my best ever meter-reader, backyard-to-backyard jumps to clear that barrier.

"Do it," the voice said.

I obeyed, taking a running start, grabbing the rough top of the steel supporting pole on my way up, and turning my body over the jagged edge of the top wire in fine form.

Although I had successfully cleared the fence, as I landed on the other side, I twisted my ankle and fell forward in the loose road metal that had been imported from the Geneva Steel slag heap to build up the freeway bank. My ankle hurt, my palms and wrists were scraped, and I had bruised my forehead. But miraculously my clothes still looked great, though I did have to mop up a little blood from my hands and brow with the cowboy bandanna.

A field of weeds lay before me and then a corral with a few old horses.

"Cross that field."

I crossed, favoring my sore ankle as I went, steadily filling my socks with scratchy foxtail seeds. When I came to the rail fence around the corral, the voice spoke again: "Go into the corral."

I stepped up and over this second low fence and went in. Once inside the corral, with some complete stranger's tired horses for company, I found myself standing almost immediately before a good-sized pile of semidry horse manure.

"Take and eat. Take and eat. Dig with your hands," a knowing voice incanted.[4] "What you desire is at the bottom of this pile. It is *your* pearl of great price if you are willing to abandon pride and shame and give all of your best efforts to obtain it." These later words, about abandoning pride and shame and giving all of my best efforts to obtain, echoed what I had been told in religion class earlier that day.

After a moment of stunned indecision, of gazing down and contemplating self-sacrifice, obedience, and equestrian ambiance, I smiled. I wasn't *that* ready to give up pride and shame to obey heroic voices.

I may have been partially crazy, but I was partially healed at that moment.[5] I turned around, stepped up and over the rail fence and out of the corral, walked back across the field, reclimbed the freeway fence—more slowly this time—and this time tearing my shirt in a little, jagged half cross opposite Reddy Kilowatt. Back in my car, I folded the cowboy bandanna so that the blood stains would not show and replaced the neckerchief. I repaired the corner tear in my shirt from the inside with a roll of black electrical tape retrieved from the Dodge glove compartment. Finally, one by one, I pulled the foxtails out of my socks, placing the last sticker in the shirt pocket behind Reddy Kilowatt as a remembrance.

While I had not yet given up on the spiritually heroic, I had learned something important about the difference between being called and being chosen, as well as something about the developmental error of trying to precipitate premature revelation. An untamed journey into strangeness had been redeemed by a retrograde movement away from seeming revelation and into progress. I completed my journey to Salt Lake City without further incident. I limped all day on my sore ankle, over eight miles from light meter to light meter and dog to dog, not yet knowing why, in my pain, I felt so happy.[6]

That was twenty-four years ago. Since then, I have read how the twentieth-century martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer felt compelled to warn of the hazards of cheap grace.[7] I of the revelatory tradition had needed to be warned about the hazards of cheap revelations. But it is important to note that the "cheapness" of the revelation was not so much in my having it as in my failure to see and appreciate it for what it was: something less than the truth, something more than dull sameness. Progress did not lie in the direction of acting indiscriminately on the promptings of strange voices. But there was more to be learned from the corral experience than simply closing the door on odd motivational calls to unexpected possibilities.

For better or for worse, cheap revelations still make unbidden and odd appearances in my mind. But I have learned to be cautious

and to better appreciate their uneven nature. I have learned to be more responsible—but not completely self-responsible—for what I do in the name of inspiration. Other developmental lessons have arisen along my path when I have ventured out into strangeness, breached the truth, and found hidden progress through retrograde motion. Some of these lessons have been difficult and filled with searing pain.

Some of the lessons have been dangerous. Had I been a better writer, I would have placed in print some of the bad ideas that I needed to have in order to progress, and those publications may have hurt others. But God was good to me. I was given a space—an extension of spiritual childhood—by the charity of God. Within that artless, silent space,[8] my worst false moves could be redeemed and turned to progress.

As I look at others whose spiritual turmoil is moving them to the margins of the Church, I wonder: Was I spared their pain simply because I lacked their gift of expression? Where would I be now if I could have written well enough to irritate people? Where will these articulate and troubled friends and their children be ten years from now if they forsake the gospel for thoughts they truly need to think but will later abandon if they stay on course?

I do not have a single answer to the dilemma created by the empathy I feel for those having strange and troubled voices, those who seem in retrograde motion away from the sacred. On the one hand, I note how doubt, anger, and fear are linked in opposition to faith in the scriptures (see D&C 60:2, 7). On the other hand, I see heaven's tolerance for questions, even stupid questions (Gen. 18:22–33; John 3:4). Some appear to be asking questions in an attempt to get out of the Church, but others appear to be asking questions in an urgent attempt to stay in. Because I cannot always tell the motivations of the questioners, I need to exercise generosity toward all of the hearers of strange voices, particularly those whose ideas call me into question. They may bear messages that heaven means for me to hear in order to call me from stagnation.

But as a steward of the good, I also need to exercise a protective generosity toward the "little ones" in my care, including myself.[9] I am forced to take protective action if the torch that was welcomed into the Church as a light starts burning worshipers.

I don't think there is a rational set of principles that can guide me to correct judgment in every challenge to my stewardship. I must constantly pray, "Father help me, guide me." The best moments of life—the most significant moments of progress—often transcend the abstract operating rules. Though principles are necessary, highly useful, and not to be scoffed at, the final step of every good action requires openness to that which is often beyond the strict specification of rules: $299/*or*.

Since my encounter in the corral, little of heroic moment has happened to me. Prayers have been answered, revelations and creative insight have been bestowed, but nothing has happened to call me into the spiritual heroics I once longed for. Rather, much of the longing has ceased. I now understand better than I used to the violence that can be involved in attempting to lay claim to revelation's miracles when desire gets ahead of faith.[10] I am now more prone to seek to know in quieter ways—finding in paradox that the more quietly one asks the questions the more openly one receives the answers. I find solace in the wisdom of the good book: "Whoso hearkeneth unto me shall dwell safely, and shall be quiet from fear of evil" (Prov. 1:33); "the words of wise men are heard in quiet more than the cry of him that ruleth among fools" (Eccl. 9:17). I find counsel in Paul's ironic instruction "that ye study to be quiet" (1 Thes. 4:11). And I find contentment in the unheralded *spiritual usual.* For now, that is enough.

Thomas W. Draper is Associate Professor of Family Sciences at Brigham Young University.

NOTES

[1]Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments; Johannes Climacus* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985), 108–9.

[2]In learning to speak, children will often first learn from context to use specific words, such as *feet,* correctly. As they progress, children learn to apply general rules of grammar, such as using an *s* to form plurals. This step in progress produces an apparent regression. For a time, typical children will form and speak plurals like *foots.* Eventually children master both the general rule and its exceptions and say *feet* again. See David McNeil, "The Development of Language," in

Paul H. Mussen, ed., *Carmichael's Manual of Child Psychology*, 3d ed., 3 vols. (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1970), 1:1101.

[3]G. Homer Durham, ed., *The Discourses of Wilford Woodruff* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1969), 295–96.

[4]"And suddenly I heard a voice from some nearby house, a boy's voice or a girl's voice, I do not know: but it was a sort of sing-song, repeated again and again." Frank Sheed, trans., *The Confessions of St. Augustine* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1942), bk. 8, 146.

[5]"Thus, step by step, he came to recognize the difference between the . . . spirits that moved him." Ignatius Loyola, *St. Ignatius' Own Story: As Told to Luis González de Cámara,* trans. William J. Young (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1956), vita 8, 10.

[6]"The pain was so great that I screamed aloud, but simultaneously felt such infinite sweetness that I wished the pain to last eternally. It was the sweetest caressing of the soul by God." Santa Teresa of Avila as quoted in Kenneth Clark, *Civilisation: A Personal View* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 191.

[7]Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship,* rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 45.

[8]"A rest to [the] mind, a cheerer of spirits, . . . a diverter of sadness, a calmer of unquiet thoughts, a moderator of passions." Izzak Walton and John Cotton, *The Compleat Angler* (New York: A. L. Burt, 1655), pt. 1, ch. 1.

[9]"We are all responsible for all. For all the 'babes,' for there are big children as well as little children. All are 'babes.'" Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov,* ed. Ralph E. Matlaw, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Norton Critical Edition, 1976), 560.

[10]Compare Emmanuel Levinas' section on "Spirit and Violence" in *Difficult Freedom,* trans. Seán Hand (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 6–7.