

Thoughts for the Best, the Worst of Times

On 12 June 1982, Lowell L. Bennion, a 1928 graduate of the University of Utah, was awarded an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters, by his alma mater in Salt Lake City. He had earlier earned a doctoral degree in social philosophy from the University of Strasbourg in 1933.

Long associated with the LDS Institute of Religion at the University of Utah as director and teacher, Dr. Bennion has been executive director of the Community Services Council of the Salt Lake area since 1972. He is currently bishop of the East Mill Creek Twelfth Ward.

Professor J. Boyer Jarvis, associate vice president for Academic Affairs, read the following tribute to Dr. Bennion, whose response to the 1982 University of Utah graduates is printed below:

For his lifetime of service as an inspiring teacher, a trusted counselor and a compassionate community leader, for his unselfish dedication to the advancement of civil rights and equal opportunity, for his deeply rooted ethical idealism and his unceasing quest for ultimate human values, and in recognition of his countless contributions to the well-being of others, the University of Utah, with authority given by law, confers upon Lowell L. Bennion the degree Doctor of Humane Letters.

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times It was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair."¹ This was Charles Dickens's appraisal of life in the late eighteenth century in his *Tale of Two Cities*. Granted, his two cities were Paris, paralyzed by violence, and London, paralyzed by fear, during that bloody period of the French Revolution known as the Reign of Terror, but I feel the same way about the twentieth century. There is much that is bad in our time: world wars, unresolved conflicts in the Middle East and the South Atlantic, the possibility of a nuclear holocaust, and social problems which do not diminish.

But there is also much that is good about living at this time and in this country. I appreciate the comforts of life: a hot shower, a glass of orange juice, central heating, and fast and pleasant means of travel and communication. Had we been born in the eighteenth century, half of us probably would not have outgrown childhood and many of our mothers would have died agonizingly in childbirth.

I am especially grateful for the rich cultural heritage which we enjoy. All the creations of science, the arts, philosophy, and religion are at our disposal.

This university has opened our eyes to many of them. I am so happy to have been born after Amos, Jesus, Confucius, Socrates, Shakespeare, Goethe, Robert Frost, and countless others.

I acknowledge, however, the injustice, the inequality, the great amount of suffering, and the tragedy of life. I know that our human existence is tenuous, uncertain, and contingent upon forces beyond our control. But human life has always been at risk. It was not made for the faint of heart, never meant for cowards. Our existence is fraught with risks.

I wish today to suggest a few ways of coping with this uncertainty. We can never anticipate the turn of events. We cannot build life around the unknown. Our best hope is to prepare ourselves in mind and heart to meet any situation which may arise. “’Tisn’t life that matters, but the faith we bring to it,” said Hugh Walpole. I would add, ’Tisn’t life that matters as much as the faith, integrity, wisdom, and love we bring to it.

Keep faith with life. Don’t be defeated twice, once by circumstance and once by yourself. Believe in the venture of living, accept your life as a precious gift, live it to the full. Plan your life as though you were going to see it through. I meet young people who say, “Why work, why study, why sacrifice, why postpone immediate satisfactions for long-range values when there is no future?” To them I say, the uncertainty of life does not make it less valuable. That uncertainty is no reason to waste life in shallow, meaningless living. I remember an English poet’s reaction to the bombing of his native London in World War II. He reported that he became vividly aware of many delightful things in his environment which had before gone unnoticed. I can understand his response.

By virtue of my age, my days are numbered. For that reason, they become increasingly precious to me. I want to know life in all of its beauty, goodness, and truth — that is, as much as I can grasp of it. Come what may, I urge you to be anxiously engaged in life and to live it with hope and courage, attitudes worthy of the human spirit. Recently I stood by the bed of a friend stricken with multiple sclerosis — a big, strong, young man laid low by one of the worst of diseases. He looked up and smiled and said, “Doc, if it were not for bad luck, I wouldn’t have any luck at all.”

I also like the spirit of this Greek epitaph: “A shipwrecked sailor, buried on this coast, bids you set sail. Full many a gallant bark, when we were lost, weathered the gale.”² Ecclesiastes, the most realistic book in the Bible, acknowledges the futility of much of our striving but does not despair.

Go thy way, eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart
Let thy garments always be white; and let thy head lack no ointment. Live joyfully with thy wife whom thou lovest all the days of thy life of vanity, which he [God] hath given thee under the sun: *And whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might.* (Eccl. 9:8–10; italics added)

My second suggestion on how to cope with uncertainty is to continue to do what you have been encouraged and even forced to do at this university — that is to think, to use your mind. “Human life divided by reason,” said

Goethe, "leaves a remainder." Life is more than reason. Human values transcend thinking. Logic alone fails us in the most difficult decisions we must make. We have no choice but to walk by hope, by faith, by feeling as well as by thinking. Although we must go beyond knowledge, I believe we ought never to ignore it or to act contrary to what we know. An elderly German carpenter friend, uneducated academically, told me about the nonsense he had to listen to in a class he attended. Then he said, "I don't believe anything that doesn't make good horses senses." "Bravo," I replied. "Neither do I!"

Thinking is crucially needed when we seek to express that great ethical-religious principle, "Love thy neighbor as thyself." I believe to love other human beings unconditionally is a great good for the one who loves, but to love one's neighbor intelligently — with some knowledge of human nature and its need — is essential if love is to be a blessing to the recipient as well as the giver.

The problems of our time cannot be resolved by good will alone because they are rooted in conditions which need to be understood rationally. Permit an illustration. I believe that about 20 percent of our people are so handicapped physically, emotionally, or mentally that they cannot compete successfully in our so-called free market economy. To meet their needs, we have created a motley group of welfare measures which are well intended and presently quite necessary. But they do not, for the most part, contribute to the dignity and self-worth of the recipients. For this 20 percent of our citizens, we need an economic order adapted to the capabilities of the handicapped in which they can become productive, contributing members of society. Such an order could complement the free enterprise system which serves the 80 percent of us reasonably well.

Compassion alone will not meet the needs of the disabled. Knowledge alone will not change society. But knowledgeable and compassionate men and women can improve almost any situation. I encourage you to be realistic idealists — idealistic in your aspirations and values but realistic in the means you choose to achieve your ends.

Thus far I have recommended that you keep faith with life and that you bring to it your best thinking. I have two other suggestions which I shall describe briefly. They relate to the moral-ethical life. As human beings, we not only act, but we also reflect on our actions and come to terms with our behavior. I believe that all the ethical principles of life are expressions of two primary virtues — integrity and love. Integrity includes humility, honesty, sincerity, meekness, and moral courage; kindness, patience, compassion, forgiveness, tolerance, and empathy are expressions of love of neighbor.

Integrity means oneness, wholeness. To have integrity one must have convictions, principles, standards, and live in harmony with them. One of the finest expressions of integrity I find in the Hindu devotional classic, the *Bhagavad Gita*. It reads: "On action alone be thy interests / Never on its fruits / Let not the fruit of action be thy motive . . ." ³ We have limited control over the results of our actions. Mother Nature, human beings, and God respond and react to us as they will. But my action I can control. And when I give my full attention to action, without worrying about blame or reward,

I have a heightened sense of oneness and wholeness. The more of life we can enjoy for its own sake, the richer it will be. Hold fast to your integrity. It will give you moral strength, courage, and peace of mind.

Integrity, however, is not enough. We are not only individuals in need of inner strength and unity, we are also social beings. We "live and move and have our being in each other." To live a selfish, self-centered life is contrary to our nature. It will bring neither fulfillment to us individually nor harmony to society. So I say, invest yourself in humanity. Find security and meaning in your linkage with friends and loved ones and by reaching out as Albert Schweitzer did, with empathy and compassion to those less fortunate than you.

In memory of my dear friend, Louis Zucker, may I conclude with a postscript on integrity and love in the words of one of his heroes, the prophet Micah: "Wherewith shall I come before the Lord and bow myself before the high God? . . . He hath showed thee, a man, what is good and what doth the Lord require of thee, *but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God.*" (Mic. 6:6-8; italics added)

Thank you, and may you have good sailing.

NOTES

1. Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (New York: New American Library, Inc., 1960), p. 13.

2. Theodoridas, *Palatine Anthology*, trans. Henry Wellesley book 7, p. 283, as cited in Bartlett's *Familiar Quotations*, 1937 ed., p. 1092.

3. *Bhagavad Gita*, 2:47, trans. F. Edgerton in Bartlett's *Familiar Quotations*, 1980 ed., p. 94.