



The Ward Teacher

Edward A. Geary



n the first Sunday after my fourteenth birthday, I was given the responsibility to watch over the Church and see that all the members did their duty, and also to prevent iniquity, hardness with each other, lying, backbiting, and evil speaking. It was a big assignment. Fortunately, I was not alone. All the other boys in town were also ordained teachers at fourteen. And even as deacons for the two preceding years we had had a duty to warn, expound, exhort, and teach, besides passing the sacrament each Sunday. These duties had been more theoretical than actual, though; and I would hardly have ventured to warn the patrons of Klecker's pool hall or to expound the gospel to Ed Brinkerhoff, who drove the school bus up from Lawrence on weekdays but delivered lengthy scriptural discourses on High Council Sundays. Most of the watching over the Church was done by Bishop Brasher and his counselors, so in practice the main duty of my new calling was to make a round of ward teaching visits once a month.

Even so, I didn't take my ordination lightly. When my father and the bishop and Brother McElprang and Brother McCandless laid their heavy hands on my head, it was as though the weight of manhood were settling on me. Afterwards they all shook my hand solemnly. Brother McElprang said I might be envied by a king, and the bishop pointed out that Joseph Smith had been just about my age when he received his first vision. I said little, only nodded my head to show that I was paying attention, but I had already been thinking of those things. I knew that I hadn't taken my religion seriously enough in the past. On several occasions I had gone to the picture show on Sunday nights, and I had often used language and entertained thoughts that were not right for a bearer of the priesthood. Now that I was a teacher, I was determined to do better, to live a more exemplary life.

EDWARD A. GEARY is a long-time DIALOGUE contributor. His book, Goodbye to Poplarhaven: Recollections of a Utah Boyhood, will be published this fall by the University of Utah Press.

Shortly after my ordination, Bishop Brasher gave me my ward teaching assignment. I was to accompany Brother Rasmussen on his beat, which would be a great opportunity for me, the bishop said, because he really knew the scriptures. Brother Rasmussen was an elderly man, rather unsteady on his feet but with a firm glare in his eyes and a strong, high-pitched voice. He was one of those who stood up every Fast Sunday in testimony meeting; and in priesthood meeting when the bishop asked if there were any further business to discuss before we separated into quorums, he regularly volunteered advice on the operation of the welfare farm and other ward affairs. The bishop said that I must always respect Brother Rasmussen and follow his direction because he was a high priest and I was only a teacher. But even though I was the junior companion, he added, I had the responsibility to see that the ward teaching was faithfully done and that no offense was given to the people we visited.

I didn't have to worry about making our visits regularly. Brother Rasmussen was as dependable as the dry wind that blew through the valley. On the last Sunday of the month he was always waiting for me at the meeting-house door, stiff and sour, ready to go. We covered our beat in the same order each month, beginning with the Meeker brothers, who lived on Main Street in the box-like brick house where they had grown up. They belonged to the fairly numerous class in our town known as old batches. Like old maids — another sizeable class — old batches were never referred to without the senescent adjective, as though the single state automatically made one old. But while most of the old maids lived respectable, almost invisible, church-going lives, the old batches tended to be somewhat disreputable. For example, there was Charlie Graham, the window-peeper, periodically captured by some irate husband or father and shipped off to the state hospital for six months, only to reappear and repeat the same cycle again. Or there was Jack Horrocks, who chased young girls when he was drunk. He used to hide behind a tree in the park or in the shadows by the school house and suddenly lurch out at passing girls with a throaty growl that struck terror into the adolescent female soul. He only engaged in this sport when he was too drunk to run very fast, so he never caught anybody, but he probably still peoples the nightmares of dozens of women. Kimball Bolden, on the other hand, who was always drunk, never chased anybody, but squinted at one and all through red-rimmed eyes while muttering indistinguishable imprecations under his breath.

Ralph and Homer Meeker were fairly respectable, as old batches went. They didn't attend church, but they were hard-working and self-sustaining with a farm and some livestock, and while they usually spent their evenings at Klecker's, they seemed to make their way back home again in a not too badly impaired condition. Their dooryard had once been planted with lawn and shrubs, but the grass had gone unmowed for many years and the lilacs and honeysuckle and yellow roses had grown wild, forming a thorny wilderness that almost hid the house. The front entrance was entirely overgrown, and to make our visit we had to go around to the kitchen door. The kitchen appeared to be the only room the Meeker brothers occupied; and if it had not been for the smoke coming out of the chimney, we might have thought the house was aban-

done as we stood on the doorstep waiting for someone to answer Brother Rasmussen's knock.

It was always Ralph who opened the door and Homer who cleared off a couple of straight-backed chairs for us to sit on. The brothers looked the same age, but I knew that Ralph was the elder because he always drove the green pickup truck when they went out to the field and Homer had to get out to open and shut the gates. Except for their daily trips to work and the nightly excursions to Klecker's, the Meekers seemed to go nowhere, and I imagined them sitting from month to month in that kitchen, staring at the worn linoleum in a silence broken only by the visit of the ward teachers. Brother Rasmussen and I sat stiffly upright in our suits and white shirts, while Homer slumped at the table and Ralph tilted his chair back against the hot water tank, both wearing their daily uniform of blue denim overalls and work shoes with flakes of dried manure on the edges.

Brother Rasmussen always had me say the prayer. I got to my feet self-consciously, folded my arms, squinted my eyes shut, and mumbled a few phrases, then sat awkwardly down again. Brother Rasmussen said an emphatic Amen and raised his head. Ralph and Homer remained as they were. Then Brother Rasmussen opened his Book of Mormon and read several verses selected, apparently, at random, pausing often to clear his throat or blow his nose on a handkerchief that he fished out of the side pocket of his coat. When he had finished reading, he shut the book and looked sternly from one brother to the other.

"Well, brethren," he would say, "I didn't see you at meeting today."

Each time there was a pause while Ralph Meeker shifted his weight on the tilted chair. "Well, no," he drawled. "We don't get out much."

Brother Rasmussen twisted his thin lips. "The Lord has instructed us," he said, "that it is expedient that the Church meet together often and partake of the sacrament."

Ralph Meeker leaned to one side and spat into the coal scuttle. "We don't get out much," he said.

From the Meeker place it was four blocks to Sister Woodruff's house along a route that was part of my daily walk to and from school. Every step of the way is so deeply impressed on my memory that I can still feel the gravel under my shoes, hear the humming of Oliver Roper's bees, smell the fragrance of the big crabapple at the corner of Dave Leonard's lot, and taste the wild plums that grew along Michael Truman's fence. But on ward teaching day I had no leisure for sensory indulgence. Brother Rasmussen drove an old Nash whose engine he raced savagely, whose steering wheel he gripped as though it might try to get away from him, and whose first gear he could never find. Though he threw the lever violently back and forth before giving it a decisive downward tug, he invariably started out in high, the car lurching and gasping until he rammed it into second. Once we got under way things went somewhat better, since there was little traffic on the streets, though we did run Angus Burnside into the ditch one Sunday. Stopping was easy. Brother Rasmussen simply stood on the brake until the engine died.



Sister Woodruff was an elderly widow of imposing frame who lived alone and kept up her house and yard by herself. Her impatience with dust on the sideboard or weeds amid the peonies extended also, I sensed, to the ward teachers who intruded upon her routine every month. There was always a long wait after we knocked and a shifting of curtains at the window before the door was finally opened. Then she stood blocking the entry for several moments before she spoke.

"It's you again, is it?" she would say. "Wipe your feet before you come in."

Brother Rasmussen always marched in without wiping, but I conscientiously scrubbed my shoes on the rug while Sister Woodruff waved her arms to keep the flies from coming through the open door. If one got past her, she sent me an accusing look before she withdrew to her rocking chair and took up her crocheting. We sat on a sofa whose real fabric I never saw, covered as it was by a huge throw.

"Go on, then," Mrs. Woodruff said. "Go on." But if Brother Rasmussen spent too much time in his reading from the Book of Mormon, she would break in impatiently. "Oh Lard, Ole, get to the point!"

At this, Brother Rasmussen would draw himself up very straight, shut the book emphatically, and speak in an aggrieved tone. "We have come as the representatives of the bishop, Sister Louisa, to bring a scriptural message into your home and to see that there is harmony within the ward and kingdom."

"Oh Lard, Ole," she would say.

The last stop on our ward teaching beat was several thinly settled blocks to the south, through a saltgrass swale. Billy Evans, a gnome-like little man with huge features, threw open his door before we were well out of the car and stood waiting for us, his head bobbing up and down as though it were suspended on a spring.

"The block teachers is here, Martha," he would say to his wife, who was blind and sat always in the same chair, her face turned expectantly toward the sound, her eyelids red and sunken, her toothless gums champing in inarticulate cries of greeting. The obvious pleasure that our visit gave the Evanses was a great relief after the indifference or hostility at the other houses, and this was the one part of our ward teaching assignment that I really enjoyed. Billy Evans listened to the scripture reading without interruption, his head bobbing all the while, but the moment Brother Rasmussen closed the book, Billy Evans sent forth a torrent of talk, story after story, all having to do with remarkable experiences. He told of visits by the Three Nephites, miraculous accounts of the temple garments' protecting those who wore them, tales of enemies of the Church being smitten. I found his stories fascinating, but Brother Rasmussen didn't like them at all. After two or three unsuccessful attempts to break into the stream, he would retreat to disapproving silence, his lips twisting tighter and tighter until at last he lurched to his feet and declared that a ward teaching visit should not be unduly prolonged.

Except for the good feeling I brought away from the Evans home each month, I couldn't see that ward teaching was contributing much to my program for spiritual improvement. I had cut out Sunday picture shows and started attending Mutual every Tuesday night, even when they didn't have activities, but these were only external things. I knew that the real growth had to happen inside, and I was finding that perfecting my life was a bigger job than I had anticipated. I had always prayed more or less regularly at bedtime, uttering thanks for my many blessings and asking for the things I wanted, or thought I ought to want, but I became aware that it was only speaking rote phrases into the darkness. When a visiting apostle said in stake conference that the spirit is most receptive during the early morning hours, I began setting my alarm for five A.M. so that I could study the scriptures and pray before breakfast, but I found that my spirit was most receptive to sleep at that hour. Almost every morning I would doze off in the middle of a sentence and wake up to find that I couldn't remember anything I had read. When Brother McElprang told us in priesthood meeting about Enos and how he had gone into the forest and prayed all day and night until he received an answer from the Lord, I made up my mind to follow his example. The next Saturday I arose early and went fasting to the willow thicket by the Big Canal, intending to pray all day. I found a secluded spot and knelt down, but after just a few minutes I ran out of things to say. I stayed there with my eyes shut, hoping that something more would come, but then my knees started to hurt. I became conscious of little rustlings in the weeds and the plop of a water rat into the canal, and I realized that I wasn't thinking about spiritual things at all. After another effort or two to get in tune, I gave it up and went home, arriving in time for

breakfast. I was beginning to suspect that I might not have been a valiant spirit in the preexistence.

Still, I didn't want to give up. Surely there must be some great spiritual experience in store for me if I would only prepare myself for it. After all, Joseph Smith must have seemed an unlikely candidate for the great manifestations that had come to him when he was just a boy. Sometimes, lying in my bed in the dark, I would try to imagine what it must have been like for him, how it would be to have some evil power assail you when you tried to pray. The thought of it sent a tremor of fear through me. Yet it was equally frightening to think of angelic visitations. What if, right at that moment, a light should appear in my bedroom and begin to grow until it was above the brightness of noonday? Sometimes I worked myself into such a fright that I buried my head under the covers, with just my nose sticking out for air, and slept that way all night.

On one ward teaching visit, Brother Rasmussen tried to persuade the Meeker brothers that they ought to get married, pointing out to them that every bearer of the priesthood had an obligation to raise up a righteous posterity. "Now you have the means to support a wife, a good house and all of that," he said, looking around the littered kitchen. "You could use a woman's touch here, curtains on the windows and the like of that." Then he proceeded to enumerate the widows and old maids in town.

Ralph Meeker showed his yellow teeth. "Naw," he said, "we ain't int'rested in none of your widahs."

The next month, when Brother Rasmussen mentioned Lula Brown as an eligible maiden lady, Ralph Meeker snorted contemptuously.

"Hell, there ain't enough juice in her to drownd a pissant."

Brother Rasmussen grew indignant at this and declared that any man who denied a woman her chance to be a mother in Zion would be held accountable at the last day. Ralph Meeker, silent again, grinned with his yellow teeth while Homer sat impassively, leaning his chin on his hand.

During the summer months we usually found Sister Woodruff working in her yard, wearing an everyday house dress and a wide-brimmed straw hat. Brother Rasmussen would twist his lips at this open violation of the Sabbath, and Sister Woodruff, in turn, showed irritation at being interrupted in her gardening.

"Sunday work will never prosper," he announced one sweltering afternoon. Sister Woodruff, who had been loosening the soil around her rose bushes, stood up with her face a fiery red.

"Maybe you should try working on Sunday, Ole," she said when she had caught her breath. "That would be *one* day, at least."

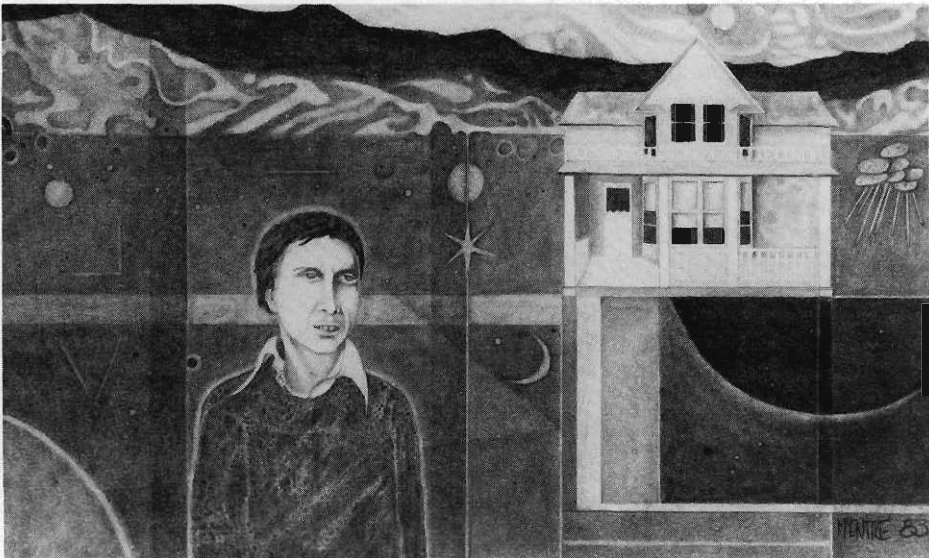
I sensed that these were the occasions the bishop had in mind when he had cautioned me to be sure no offense was given, but I didn't see what I could do. I felt that Brother Rasmussen was not as tactful and longsuffering as he might have been. On the other hand, though, Sister Woodruff seemed a little deficient in respect for the priesthood. I tried to think of some way to suggest to them that they were treating each other with some degree of hardness, but Brother Rasmussen always beat me to the punch.

"Sister Louisa," he said sternly, "the Lord is displeased with those who mock the priesthood."

This time Sister Woodruff didn't even look up from her work. "Priesthood indeed!" she said. "You were a fool long before you had the priesthood, Ole. All the priesthood has done is make you a pompous fool."

When school started in the fall, I began to take seminary from Brother Fowles, who had just arrived in town. He gave a new impetus to my determination to become a more spiritual person. Brother Fowles was a very spiritual man himself. He came from Salt Lake and knew many of the General Authorities personally and could tell numerous stories about the spiritual experiences in their lives. Of course the spirituality didn't come just from living in Salt Lake. Brother Fowles also had many stories that showed what a wicked city it was, stories which confirmed my impressions drawn from the odor of cigar smoke in the lobby of the Moxum Hotel and from Ferd Nichols's girl cousins, who had tried to teach us to do the dirty boogie.

We were supposed to be studying the Old Testament in seminary, but Brother Fowles didn't limit himself just to the text. When we read Genesis, he told us that Cain was still wandering the earth because of his sin in killing his brother and entering a secret combination with Satan. Cain was a great big black man, Brother Fowles said, bigger than any ordinary man because he came from before the flood. He told about people who had met Cain, and how he begged them to kill him because he couldn't die. I was nervous about going out at dusk after hearing these stories because it was always when people were alone at dusk that they met Cain.



Brother Fowles also told us about ouija boards, which I had never seen except in the Gumpy Ward Christmas catalog. Evidently they were very common in Salt Lake and very dangerous because if you played them you were tampering with spiritual powers and could easily fall into the hands of the devil. Brother Fowles told us about one group of kids who were members of the Church and went to seminary but nevertheless began to experiment with ouija boards. When they asked the ouija whether the Church was true, the pointer flew off the board and hit the wall, and later the girl whose house they played in saw a dark presence in a corner of the room and they couldn't get rid of it until the bishop came and blessed the house. Another time, some boys were working the ouija board in the cemetery, and one of them became possessed and tried to kill himself, and the others had to haul him forcibly to the bishop for a blessing.

I devoured Brother Fowles's teachings eagerly in seminary, but when I thought about them later, especially when I was alone at night, they made me uneasy. I would certainly not do the things those kids had done. I had no desire to approach the spirits through the ouija board or to get a testimony of the devil by praying to him, as a foolish missionary had done and a huge man on a black horse had ridden right into his room and carried him off before the eyes of his companion. But if it was dangerous to tamper with spiritual powers, it was equally destructive, Brother Fowles said, to live without the spirit. I didn't want to turn out like Ralph and Homer Meeker, totally insensitive to spiritual things. Nor did I want to be like some people Brother Fowles had known, who tried to intellectualize the gospel and who were consequently led astray by the philosophies of men. The worst thing of all was to have an intellectual testimony, to try to understand the things of God through human reason instead of by the pure witness of the Spirit.

In this frame of mind, I began to value our visits to the Evanses more and more. For Billy Evans there seemed to be no demarcating line between the physical and spiritual worlds. A man could be working in a coal mine, just going about his regular business, and have a sudden rockfall kill the fellow working next to him and yet leave him unharmed, except for crushing his foot, but that wasn't covered by his garments. In Billy Evans I felt that I had found a living example of that simple, spiritual faith which Brother Fowles recommended. To be sure, he rarely came out to church, and I couldn't remember him ever having a job in the ward, but that was probably because he needed to take care of his wife.

During one of our visits in the fall, Billy Evans got going on the Three Nephites and the trail of wonders they left behind them as they travelled through the world. On one occasion a man he knew had been stranded in the mountains by a snow storm, and because the wood was wet he couldn't get a fire started and was just about to freeze to death, when suddenly, as he was striking his last match, someone stepped up behind him and threw something like gasoline on the fire and it flared up instantly. But when the man looked around nobody was there.

"That was a Nephite, sure enough," Billy Evans said, his head bobbing up and down.

I asked him whether he had ever met one of the Three Nephites himself.

He bobbed and grinned mysteriously. "I know some things about them," he said. "I know some things I ain't allowed to tell."

I was tremendously impressed at this because Brother Fowles had told us that some people receive manifestations so special that they cannot be revealed to anyone else.

Brother Rasmussen terminated the visit abruptly, as usual, but when we were in the car he turned to me before starting the engine.

"Young man, the devil will deceive the very elect if he can," he said.

I nodded. I wasn't sure exactly what he meant, but I read in the remark some disapproval of Billy Evans, perhaps because he didn't come to church regularly. However, I was beginning to suspect that Brother Rasmussen had an intellectual testimony.

The next month Brother Rasmussen had the flu and couldn't do his ward teaching. I was going to go with my father, but something came up at the last minute, and I faced the prospect of covering the beat by myself. When I thought of those inhospitable dwellings, I considered not going out at all that month. I could tell the bishop that I had forgotten until it was too late. Or I could even report that I had made the visits. Nobody was likely to tell on me. But as soon as these thoughts entered my mind, my conscience stung me. Here I had been praying that I might become a more faithful servant, yet I was weakening at the first sign of adversity.

The visits turned out better than I expected. It almost seemed as if Ralph and Homer Meeker and Sister Woodruff were glad to see me, though they said no more than usual. At Sister Woodruff's, it occurred to me to offer to come back the next Saturday and fix the loose hinge on her gate. She looked up from her needlework with something like surprise. "That would be very nice," she said.

The late autumn dusk was falling by the time I walked out to Billy Evans's place, but I was rather enjoying my ward teaching now and was in no hurry to finish. I tried to get Billy Evans to tell me more about the Three Nephites, but his thoughts were running along different lines on this night.

"The Nephites isn't the only ones still walking the earth, you know," he said.

"I know. There's Cain too."

"Cain, yes," he said. "And the Gadianton robbers."

I had read about the Gadianton band in the Book of Mormon, but it had never occurred to me that any evidences of them might still remain.

"They was all through these mountains, up and down," Billy Evans said. "And they're still there." Then he told how in the early days the people had tried to settle a certain place down by St. George but nothing would grow there, and Brigham Young told them it was because it had been a habitation of the Gadianton robbers.

"And there's just such another spot right up here in the foothills," he said. "You seen it, ain't you, just past Rowleys', where there ain't nothing but little scrubby bushes?"

I tried to visualize the place but could not remember one spot that looked much different from the others. But of course I had not known what to look for. Billy Evans went on to tell of people travelling between towns at night who came upon a crowd of strange figures with pale faces and weird eyes who ran alongside them as they rode and kept pace no matter how fast they drove their horses, dropping back only when they neared a town.

"Matter of fact," he added, "I seen them myself, or as good as seen them." It was when he was working at a sheep camp, he said, when he was a young man. He had come into town for supplies and had hung around in the beer joint so long that he had to ride back to the camp in the dark.

"Well, when I got up to where the canyon narrows, I begun to hear the sounds," he said. "They was moving along in the trees at the side of the road, but of course I couldn't see nothing in the dark. When I stopped, they stopped, and it was as still as death. When I begun to move again, they begun too. They had me. There wasn't noplase I could go. Well, I begun to call on the Lord, you bet. Then, of a sudden, there come a sound like a bell ringing, way up high, something like a harness might sound but way high, like it come from the rocks. That scared me more than anything cause I thought it was a signal for them to get me, and I begun to call on the Lord more and more. I told him that if he would help me out this here one time, I'd stay clear of the beer joints and wouldn't do nothing to offend him. And lo and behold," he paused and bobbed his head emphatically, "lo and behold, the clouds parted and a great light broke through. A great light. It was something like the moon, but it wasn't no moon. It didn't shine nowhere else only just round about me and the pony, keeping the Gadiantons off. They followed me all the way to the camp, but they stayed back in the shadows. I was protected, you see, and they daresn't come any closer. Next morning, though, we found four sheep dead and not a mark on them."

When I finally left the house, night had fallen, and a cold wind was blowing from the canyon. I hadn't realized how dark it would be, and I found myself wishing I had made my visits earlier so I could have walked home in the daylight. The mountains rose black against the last rosy streaks of cloud in the western sky, and involuntarily I thought of the Gadianton robbers roaming there all through the ages, on the lookout for somebody who wasn't protected. Northward, toward home, the pale surface of the road descended into the saltgrass swale before it climbed the next rise, where there were houses. I stood still in the road and listened. Perfect silence. Not even the insect sounds of summer nights. And Billy Evans had said that the Gadianton robbers stayed out of towns. This was in town, but just barely; the swale drained the west fields, and beyond them there were only the open flats and the mountains.

I started to walk at a deliberately unhurried pace, in order to hold onto a sense of normality. The sound of my shoes on the gravel seemed to come from the dry weeds at the side of the road. If a car should come by, I thought, I could walk rapidly while its lights illuminated the road and maybe get through the swale to the houses on the other side before it was altogether dark again. But no car came. I realized that I was breathing a prayer as I walked. Of

course that was the answer. The Lord would surely protect me while I was doing his work, but I had to demonstrate faith. I had to pray properly, vocally, and kneeling. I dropped to my knees at the side of the road, bowed my head, and shut my eyes. But I couldn't keep them shut. They would pop open in the middle of a phrase to make sure nothing was approaching in the dark. When I tried to concentrate on keeping my eyes shut, I lost touch with the words I was speaking. Fear seemed to thicken in the night, and I was trembling in the piercing wind.

Brother Fowles had said that the closer you got to perfection, the harder Satan would try to hold you back. That was what had happened to Joseph Smith when he went to the Sacred Grove. But he had cried out for help, and the light had come, the light in the grove, the presences.

I scrambled to my feet. "It's okay," I said aloud. "I'm okay."

My footfalls came back from the dead growth at the sides of the road like an invisible horde keeping pace, breaking into a run when I did and staying precisely even with me. But except for the minute points of the stars against the cold vault, there was no light. Hugging the darkness to me like a cloak, I ran for home.