

# Turning

*Dian Saderup*

*Thanks to the human heart by which we live,  
Thanks to its tenderness, its joys, its fears,  
To me the meanest flower that blows can give  
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.*

— Wordsworth

IN JULY 1984, I ATTENDED TESTIMONY MEETING in my home ward in Salt Lake City. As the previous month's crop of infants were blessed, I thought that after the sacrament I would go home. It was a Fourth of July weekend and I was sunburned, sleepy, and not much in the mood for testimonies about the star-spangled banner. Besides that, I was hungry. But when the sacrament was over, I stayed. I thought my motivation was guilt, but now I know it was grace.

I don't recall that anything out of the ordinary was said. Marge Aldredge\* got up to thank the Lord for her blessings, both temporal and spiritual, and for the privilege of living in our free land. I looked hard at her face; for the first time I could see her age in it. She had been Relief Society president twelve years ago when my family moved into the ward from California, a woman of boundless energy who claimed never to have had a sick day in her life. Two years ago, her youngest son, age eighteen, had been killed in a motorcycle accident. This was the first time I had heard her speak publicly since then. As she

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\* Names and certain details related in this essay have been changed.

talked and wept, uttering the phrases of gratitude I had heard countless times from countless other Church members, I thought: Her boy is dead. She has borne the death of a son.

Then a nervous young man with a crewcut who had blessed his first child, a daughter, that day both laughed and cried as he thanked God for his wife, home, job, and his chance to serve in the National Guard. When he sat down, his wife, who still wore a blue-sprigged maternity dress, took the traveling microphone and talked about the sweet spirit of their little Rachel and how glad they were that she had been sent to them. When she had finished, her husband leapt to his feet again and said, "I was so excited I forgot to mention Rachel in my testimony, and she's why I stood up in the first place." We all laughed.

Next, a Young Special Interest woman in her early thirties stood. Her short blondish hair was styled in neat curling-iron ridges. She wore a black polyester skirt and a white ruffled blouse; her figure was plumpish. She had recently returned from a trip east where people, upon learning she lived in Utah, had beset her with questions about our spring flooding. "You mean you don't have to have police squads to keep looters from the flooded homes?" they'd queried with apparent astonishment. To us, the YSI woman said, "Brothers and sisters, the floods have been the most wonderful missionary tool. We are so lucky to live in Zion where we all love each other and take care of one another."

Although a YSI woman myself, I could find little resemblance to her. I wear my hair in a crown of braids, suspect polyester of causing cancer, and heap deprecations and deprivations upon myself if the scale rises two pounds above my ideal weight. My feelings about the Salt Lake City floods are decidedly more ambivalent than hers. Nevertheless, I felt something quicken in me as I listened to her. I knew from a brunch held in her home several months before that she had long ago purchased china, silverware, and stainless pots and pans. She had anticipated marriage, a husband, children — in the way some of my more sophisticated friends and I either parody in fun or decry in anger. Yet now, I felt a dark squeezing in my chest, and I knew the silent disappointment of her clean house and unchipped dishes, and the ache of her empty bed.

Other ward members rose, each in his or her own unremarkable way bearing testimony to, and expressing gratitude for, God, Church, family, country — the faith and institutions that grant meaning to their lives, as well as to my own. As I looked over the congregation from my near-the-back seat, I — who had wanted to sneak home for a peanut butter sandwich — felt something like awe swelling in me. There was so much *life* sitting within the four walls of that chapel. And it didn't matter that Patty Anderson had bought china at age twenty-one and thought Salt Lake the ultimate Zion, or that Greg Parsons felt moved in a Church meeting to thank God for the National Guard. I sensed how impossible it is to come anywhere near approximating verbally the urgent, tangled life we feel within. So we use commonly heard phrases to interpret and express the mystery of our unique human experience. As we sang the

closing hymn, "Oh Beautiful for Spacious Skies," the silver, fair, and dark heads of the congregation shone through my tears like a shining sea.

*Tell (for you can) what is it to be wise?  
'Tis but to know, how little can be known,  
To see all others faults, and feel our own.*

— Alexander Pope

Then in January, I sat in a specially convened conference of University Stake. The recently sustained stake president began his remarks by quoting from the official handbook: nonstudents — who comprised over a third of the stake — were to return to their resident wards. At that conference, four wards were dissolved, including my own. Since that time, two more have been disbanded. As I listened to the president's remarks — logical, organizationally sound, and devastating to countless nonstudents who depended upon their singles wards for both spiritual community and vital social interaction — I wept with anger. When he concluded, at least twenty people from various parts of the chapel hurried out.

For them and for others like them, the decision would mean vastly increased loneliness and perhaps alienation from the Church. I thought of Bryant Holmes, a young deaf man who had recently returned to the Church after several years of inactivity and was now tentatively, shyly, reaching out to new friends and spiritual counselors in our ward. He lived alone and worked as a dishwasher at a local hotel. Where would he now make that essential contact with those his own age who could help him "hear" with written interpretations of meetings and rudimentary signing? How would we explain the stake president's talk to him? "You're not a part of his stewardship, Bryant"? "It doesn't matter that in your resident ward your home teachers — business men with large families — only came twice in three years. That's where you belong"?

In the ward where I grew up, the Scoutmaster, father of four sons, was zealous and disciplined, with an unflagging hold upon the iron rod. We had two Scout patrols in our ward. My brothers were the driving force in one, and they insisted upon naming their patrol "The Vegetables," which caused no small stir among the adult leadership. For their insignia, they sketched a large cabbage on a piece of chamois and mounted it on a pool cue. Since no official pronouncement limited LDS troops to such rugged names as "The Wolverines," "The Vegetables" they remained, cabbage and all. My brothers became known among the leadership, however, as troublemakers and general wild cats. At the Scout jamboree that summer, Gary fell, hurting his arm. He told the Scoutmaster repeatedly that he was in pain, but Brother Smith accused him of exaggerating to avoid working on merit badges and forced Gary to go on a ten-mile day hike. When Gary got home from the jamboree, my mother took him immediately to the hospital. He had a broken arm. That same Brother Smith had once publicly told a young priest from an economically troubled home that he was unfit to administer the sacrament because he was wearing cowboy

boots. The boy never participated in that ordinance again and soon stopped coming to church at all.

Until recently, a friend of mine who is the mother of two daughters served as social relations leader in her stake. When her stake president learned that she had returned to school full time to work toward a master's degree in French literature, she was released. The president explained that it was important for women in positions of authority to set "the proper example" for the married and young single sisters in the Church. He counseled her not to let "this schooling thing" keep her from having more children — without a word of inquiry as to her physical or emotional capacity to bear more children or any effort to understand her own hopes, fears, and aspirations.

These incidents illustrate attitudes among some members as well as leaders in the Church that, in practice, run counter to the spirit of love for individuals and freedom for individuality that is so central to the gospel. People feel pressured to conform to official guidelines and cultural expectations — subtly, yet so intensely that some forget the very thing we as Church members have linked hands with God to do: save souls — our own and our fellows — by love unfeigned, kindness, and pure knowledge. Just as I felt the mystery and joy of common fellowship and humanity with the Church in that testimony meeting a summer ago, so have I also felt a division, a breach, between myself and members of the mainstream Church community. And I have been troubled.

*For nothing, said she, is more common than to call our own condition, the condition of life.*

— Samuel Johnson

I didn't tell you everything about Jim Smith the Scoutmaster. The fast Sunday after the jamboree where Gary broke his arm, he rose to express sincere regret at his own serious misjudgment. Many years after that, he stood again in contrition, this time over a more pervasive failing he had come to see in himself: he had been inflexible, judgmental, on occasion unkind, and lacking in those qualities that ought to distinguish a Christian and a Latter-day Saint. I don't think Jim Smith was ever a bad man, just sometimes — as he himself said — "misguided" in his efforts to love and serve God.

My married friend's insensitive stake president who released her from her calling because she had returned to school has never apologized. I am quite certain he sees no need to. It has occurred to me that I may be judging him as severely as he, in my perception, judged her. Until recently I'd forgotten or unconsciously rejected a simple moral exercise in relation to this man: When you find yourself at odds with another, try to step into his shoes, try to see the world from where he stands — even if he refuses to do the same for you. For me, this seems a first and basic step toward any fruitful understanding between people.

I've realized that this priesthood leader is trying to fulfill his calling, to faithfully watch over his stewardship in the way he truly believes the Lord would have him do. His gifts lie not in creativity of thought or originality of

expression, but in energy, motivation, and unswerving devotion to whatever cause he believes right. This man has been given a huge responsibility, and, doubtless, feels great urgency to fulfill it. Therefore he leans heavily upon the pronouncements, as he hears them, of those in authority over him. For him, earth life is a treacherous journey, and only the inspired words of the Lord's anointed prophets and apostles help make the path back to God clear. In Church scripture, teaching, and practice — both biblical and modern — I find a good deal of support for those premises. Indeed, my own views, to a startling degree, lie in sympathy with his, though they are more tentative and are held in juxtaposition with other truths I feel are of equal importance.

If I am correct, this stake president sees salvation through safety. In a world characterized by random violence, precarious joys, and chaotic experience of uncertain meaning, he is searching for sanctuary, security, hope, faith — and hopes to impart those vital intangibles to those he guides. All of us, I believe, construct spiritual and emotional frameworks of some sort through which we encounter and interpret reality; and thus we preserve, with varying degrees of effectiveness, some elemental sense of ourselves and the world around us through life's confusing storms. For whatever reasons, my friend in French literature failed to fit — and therefore threatened — her stake president's framework. Likewise, her stake president failed to fit the framework she and I share, which we felt to be more elastic than his.

This exercise in empathy, simplistic as it may seem, has helped me become more understanding, accepting, and respectful of honest differences in sentiment and insight among Church members. I have made partial reconciliation with my University Stake president. When I went to talk to him, I learned that he had chosen to follow the handbook in the sincere belief that his stake — undeniably an organizational mess prior to the decision — would now serve its members more effectively. Who knows? Maybe he is right. I told him frankly, however, that I did not consider the handbook rigid law, superceding personal inspiration for particular circumstances. I saw it rather as a source of guidance for leaders of enormous diversity in both spiritual understanding and commitment — guidance offered in the hope of maintaining some essential unity within a farflung church made up of human beings with countless limitations. It couldn't address individual circumstances. Only we could. He didn't agree.

All of us have a story. All of us have a voice. All of us have a vision — and all are limited by our own mortality and the possibility of error. I like to picture the Church as a wheel with Christ as the hub. Each individual life path is a spoke feeding into that hub. We all start our mortal journeys in our own particular places on the rim of the wheel — each with his or her unique strengths and weaknesses. Because of this, though we may be baptized into the strait and narrow way, we each journey through different territory. Different experiences give us various prides, prejudices, perceptions, and testimonies as we progress toward Christ, the central hub. Some spokes lie close to one another; others may be on opposing sides of the central focus. I believe that Joseph Smith actually saw God and that the Church established through him is literally the kingdom laid to prepare the world for the millennial reign of the

Savior. Because of this I feel a duty — if not always the disposition — to bear with those of my fellows whom I see, at times, opposite me — to respect the real rigors, perplexities, and triumphs of their unique paths. And I feel to watch for the divine fire that will, in tangible reality, flare now here, now there among us.

The kingdom will go forward, despite our collective differences and failings, and we will all play our several parts: some of us shepherds, some of us followers, some conformists, some dissenters, some critics, some apologists. The wheel will continue to turn, and we may one day find that those spokes which are now on opposing sides of the hub have together created an essential tension — a dynamic balance — between mutually necessary opposites.

*The Future belongs still more to the heart than to the mind. To love, is the only thing which can occupy and fill up eternity. The infinite requires the inexhaustible.*

— Victor Hugo

Last night I lay in bed for hours, thinking about my evening spent at Kiwanis Park in Provo. A group of young men from one of the resident wards was practicing softball. The pitcher, a stocky fellow with sunburned arms, kept ball after ball flying over home plate. The batter was a tall, leanly muscular man, balding, enthusiastic; he popped the balls one after another into the outfield where a handful of players loped to catch them or simply let them drop, as they called out to him, "Nice one, Kyle!" or "Woo-ie!" Safely to the side of home plate, a three-year-old in Star Wars pajamas chased the occasional missed balls. On the far side of the field, a girl in a red dress and bare feet also watched their play. A daughter? A girlfriend of a young team member? The wind ruffled her blond hair and red skirt and moved through the trees. An earlier storm had left the grass damp and deep green. Thunderheads still boiled over the mountains toward Spanish Fork. In the dusk, the fading sunlight seemed iridescent, as though this grass, these men, the girl and her red dress, the trees, and the torn clouds were frozen in a shimmering instant of time. I watched silently for half an hour until dark brought their play to a close.

While I watched that simple game, all the abstractions, the philosophical questions, the debates, the arguments I have pondered these past few weeks while writing this essay simply melted from my mind. For a moment, none of it mattered. I was content just to be — alive and in touch with the instant, unreflecting life that moved, like the wind in the tall trees, before me.

But why then did I stay awake thinking about that scene when the participants in it had long since gone to sleep? I wish sometimes that I could simply enjoy a softball practice, that my feelings and thoughts could begin and end on the field. But inevitably I feel compelled to interpret events around me. That doesn't mean that I am more sensitive than those players to real life — indeed, I often think just the opposite is true since I tend to intellectualize and step back from experience. But by nature, as a writer, I cannot help attempting to



order the jumble that is reality and, by that ordering, to heighten and clarify the way I experience it. I believe that people with artistic vision create many of the images through which members of a society view themselves and the world around them. There are few things more powerful than a story. In the LDS community we need artificers who can tell stories in words or paint or music — stories that capture the particular, that hum a single human song through our bones and thereby tell us something of the whole of our experience as a people and as members of the human family.

That all sounds quite lofty. A month ago we had a missionary farewell in our ward. The program lasted forever. It was packed with pretty girls in Gunnie Sax dresses singing sappy songs: “He takes some paper in his hand and with a pencil draws a man, the dream of what he’d really, really like to be. . . .” Nearly every member of the boy’s large family spoke, and we were regaled with his accomplishments from grade school on up: student-body president in junior high, seminary officer and graduate in high school, ranked second in the state in skiing, etc. I was in a lousy mood anyway and felt like throwing tomatoes at the crowd on the stand: What does skiing (or throwing tomatoes!) have to do with preaching the gospel? It is such petty things, along with the more serious sort of grievances mentioned earlier, that tend to estrange me from my people and make me want to tell my stories from *without* rather than from within their community. But if I accept the teachings of Christ, and the claims of the restored Church — the body of Christ in need of every member, as Paul expressed it — how can I justify such willing schism?

I think of the Rudolphs, a delightful German couple in my parents’ ward, who celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary several years ago. Two of their sons had died many years ago in war. This past year, Sister Rudolph has battled cancer. She is not afraid to disagree with doctrines with which she cannot sympathize, and maybe because she is elderly no one much minds. During one of my visits with her she said with characterisitc eloquence, clapping her hand down on the arm of the sofa, “I don’t care if it’s the prophet speaking, or an apostle, a bishop, or Brother Astin in Sunday School — if he expounds a doctrine I can’t understand, I won’t believe it. I judge every issue in my heart and if it feels true then amen to it, but if it doesn’t I can’t see that the Lord would hold me responsible for not believing it. In this Church you don’t have to accept anything that isn’t true, no matter who says it is!” At her side, Brother Rudolph, a retired machinist who has never lost his thick German accent, said, “Mudder, vat vill Diana tink wit you talking like dat?”

He tends their beautiful coral-colored rosebush hedges and meticulously groomed yard and, in his own words, doesn’t have “particular interest in Mudder’s books you can see all about de place. She’s got up towards four hundred volumes,” he added with pride. Brother Rudolph brought me a plateful of German delicacies made by his granddaughter. His frail, excitable wife took one.

“It is so goot to see her eat, efen a cookie,” he said. “Vit de chemoterapy she vas nauseated for fife mont’s.”

“I’m just a sack of bones now,” Sister Rudolph said. “Herman would fix me a big dinner every night. My favorite foods. Pot roast, browned potatoes,

carrots from the garden — did you ever see such a garden as his? He was hoping to put some appetite in me; it was a shame to see it all go to the dog night after night. I never knew Herman could cook such a beautiful pot roast. But damn those drugs, I couldn't eat a thing."

"Mudder," was all Brother Rudolph said.

"Excuse my language," she apologized to me, "but sometimes regular words just don't seem to fit the situation."

We talked for another hour. I basked in the almost-tangible bond of their love, built over decades of trial, rejoicing, error, and success. The texture of accumulated life shared between Brother and Sister Rudolph radiates with joyous mystery. Her mind is as clear and active as almost any I have encountered, while Brother Rudolph, I venture to say, has scarcely an intellectual bone in his body. Yet I have never seen marital love and union more complete, more refreshing, more subtle. Maybe I am foolishly idealistic, but I nurture the hope that one day my bond with the Church will be as deep, rich, and mysterious as the bond Eveline Rudolph has with her husband. I may find myself unlike my fellow Church members in many ways, but there is always the possibility — through time and endurance in collective experience — of transcendence, of tolerant, fruitful love, and humble respect.

Last Sunday in Church I listened carefully to both the Relief Society and Sunday School lessons, one on friendship, the other on the Last Supper. Each was exceptionally fine, but at the end of the first I found myself wishing I could feel so nourished by and united with my fellow Saints every Sunday, not just now and then. At the end of the second lesson, however, an announcement was made that Tasha Bevin — a four-year-old Salt Lake girl kidnapped earlier in the week — had been found safe in an abandoned school in Idaho. One united cry of rejoicing swept the nearly full chapel, and tears streamed down many faces, male and female, young and old. At that moment, the differences between us seemed very few, and I realized that love is the only lens through which we may view reality — ourselves, our fellows, and the world — aright. Our minds, our intellects, may become fully enlightened — here and in the eternities — only when suffused with that perfect love which comprehends all things.

I watched the deacons as they passed the sacrament: young, awkward boys bearing bread and water of whose significance they probably had little understanding. But did any of us? The trays passed down the pews hand to hand as, one after another, the ward members partook. Each ate and drank with the familiar ritual motion. And it struck me, like a sudden gust of wind on a still night: We all partake of the same loaf, we all drink of the same cup. What right have I to boast? Who am I to judge? Or any of us? It is, after all, by grace we are saved, after we have done all in our halting mortal ways that we are able. That grace seemed to me then the greatest mystery of all. And then I seemed to be looking through clear glass; things were no longer complex, confusing, tangled, and dark but simple and spiritually liberating. Faith — in God and in each other; humility — for our own imperfections and those of our brothers and sisters; endurance — despite conflict; love — sustained through-



out disappointment with our fellows; and gratitude — for God's grace and the human grace we may share with one another: these seemed to be the best gifts we could give or receive.

It was a singular moment of simple clarity of vision. We will live our countless lives, and I believe the wheel that is Christ and his Church will continue to turn until one morning that vision is fully realized. The words of an old Shaker hymn with its lovely melody played over and over in my mind that afternoon:

'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free,  
'Tis the gift to come down where we are to be;  
And when we find ourselves in the place just right,  
'Twill be in the valley of love and delight.

When true simplicity is gain'd,  
To bow and to bend we shan't be ashamed;  
To turn, turn will be our delight  
Till by turning, turning we come round right.

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