

Counting the Cost

Anita Tanner

IT WASN'T THE SILVER balance scale the teacher used for a centerpiece. Initially I thought it attractive, effective as a visual aid. It wasn't her manner or her voice, all appealing, that offended me. It was the words she quoted, not from the lesson manual but from Spencer W. Kimball: "Even mortal life itself, when placed upon the balance scales, weighs less than chastity" (1982, 265). The statement itself, straightforward enough, didn't bother me as much as its implications. And the unnerving fact that I seemed to be the only class member visibly disturbed; other women copied the quote into their Relief Society manuals, smiling, nodding approval. I wanted to take issue, to challenge the statement in light of my own experience and gospel learning.

I wondered if there were a woman in the class who had broken the law of chastity. How would this statement affect her? Would she then think she may as well commit suicide, since she had lost what's more important than life? And what about repentance? "Though your sins be scarlet, they shall be as white as snow" (Isa. 1:18). What about the promised miracle of forgiveness?

I thought of the doctrine of free agency, which I had been taught from childhood was most precious. If chastity was more important than life, why did God give us this second estate? Why let us come to earth with the myriad chances of losing chastity? Why not force us all to be chaste and forget earth life, thereby guarding what is more precious?

I pored over *Mormon Doctrine*, *The Miracle of Forgiveness*, and almost every LDS book I could lay my hands on. To my astonishment, I

ANITA TANNER was raised on a farm in Wyoming and educated at BYU. Both experiences have contributed to her insatiable thirst for books, ideas, paradox, and poetry.

found this quote by David O. McKay in *The Miracle of Forgiveness*: “Your virtue is worth more than your life. Please, young folk, preserve your virtue even if you lose your lives” (in Kimball 1969, 63). Heber J. Grant was also quoted on the same page, “There is no true Latter-Day Saint who would not rather bury a son or a daughter than to have him or her lose his or her chastity.” *Mormon Doctrine* declared, “Better dead clean, than alive unclean. Many is the faithful Latter-day Saint parent who has sent a son or daughter on a mission or otherwise out into the world with the direction, ‘I would rather have you come back home in a pine box with your virtue than return alive without it.’” (McConkie 1966, 124). I was horrified. I simply could not agree with these statements.

I recalled a lesson I had had in seminary when I was a teenager. My teacher drove nails into a board, likening her action to sinning and pulling the nail out to repentance. With great emphasis she concluded her demonstration, “But the hole is still there.” I had recoiled then too. I had not believed her, but how could I disbelieve statements by prophets and General Authorities? But I did.

I remembered another teacher saying that the Christian response to sin was to go down with the sinner in empathy and love and together bring yourselves up. That certainly didn’t square with McConkie’s, “I would rather have you come back home in a pine box with your virtue than return alive without it,” as if sexual sin somehow nullified the doctrine of repentance.

In the case of rape, these statements implied that a woman who had not fought to the death to avoid rape somehow came up short on courage, thereby putting the burdens of sin and guilt on the victim for having survived the ordeal.

Several friends assured me the prophets were only trying to emphasize the value of chastity in their statements. Perhaps they had exaggerated to make an important point. But, I puzzled, what exactly was the point? And what the price of exaggeration? Chastity at all costs? Once chastity is lost, is mortal life everlastingly diminished?

I knew better. I thought of my own children, six of them, and how each had made mistakes, big and small—how they’d come through stronger, better able to cope, more humble but increased. At no time did their mistakes seem bigger than life. And their continued life with attendant mistakes was the *very hope* of their overcoming.

And I remembered Diana. She was my first cousin, one year older, who bore her first child out of wedlock. I was in high school when I first heard rumors of her pregnancy. Initially I refused to believe them. But each time I saw her the realization sank solemnly upon me.

Then one day she, her father (a bishop), and her mother came to our farmhouse to "apologize for the shame brought upon the family name." All of us wept for what seemed hours, repeatedly embracing one another. She looked so forlorn. Later she bore a son and looked after him in her parents' home.

Slowly her former exuberance returned. Her face, always attractive, lost its emptiness. Her eyes lifted. Later, she met a man, married him in the Salt Lake Temple, and they are now the parents of several children. Her first son served a mission for the Church. And now visiting with her at family reunions I sense in her a resilience and joy in having "come through," an enlightenment that gives me courage for the struggles with good and evil within myself, a hope for better tomorrows.

No one can deny personal experience. Mine tells me that life is always precious, even when we are in the throes of pain and sin. God's love is so far-reaching that he has prepared a kingdom and degree of glory for even the most disobedient of his children, except for those who adamantly, willfully, and continually reject him. For most there is a way back. And that way is always worth the suffering it may cost. I see that in myself, in my children, and in Diana.

Maybe trying to reconcile prophets' words with opposing personal experience will never be easy. Maybe Eugene England in his essay "Why the Church Is as True as the Gospel" is right: "Everything anyone says is essentially an interpretation" (1986, 31). Maybe Keats's negative capability, the ability to exist amid uncertainties without reaching for reason, could apply in this case, in a church where answers are a premium, where the Mormon mind yearns for closure, where a book *Questions to Gospel Answers* may never be written. Maybe.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- England, Eugene. "Why the Church Is as True as the Gospel." *Sunstone* 10, no. 10 (1986): 30-36.
- Kimball, Spencer W. *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*. Edited by Edward L. Kimball. Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982.
- . *The Miracle of Forgiveness*. Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1969.
- McConkie, Bruce R. *Mormon Doctrine*. 2d ed. Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966.