

A Saint for All Seasons

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AS STERLING MCMURRIN PUT IT, "Every religion needs a saint, and Lowell Bennion is Mormonism's saint." Why does a church need a saint? People need a flesh and blood example, a person who has attained some measure of holiness. We look for religious heroes, perhaps one of Joseph Campbell's thousand faces, those who represent us by risking themselves and returning to share a treasure that could help us find salvation. These persons are holy not because they have attained perfection, but because they are whole. Lowell's son Ben described his father as one who sought not holiness, but wholeness.

The author of a recent book on saints agrees: "More and more people are beginning to turn towards paradigms of humanity which convey an image of 'wholeness' or 'inner peace.'"¹ She continues: "The need for saints—for a religious individual who can point us toward the correct path for inner and outer survival is growing, and the call for help reverberates throughout the world ... Saints took the first step toward higher realities and assumed the ensuing risks. To reach our own higher potential, we must honor that courage by listening to their stories and allowing ourselves to be inspired by them."²

When I began my biography of Lowell, published in 1995 by the Dialogue Foundation as *Lowell L. Bennion: Teacher, Counselor, Humanitarian*, I wanted to tell Lowell's life story partly because I hoped it would reach those in search of saintly examples. But how to write about such a one? As some wag has put it, "Living with a saint can drive you into the arms of the devil." I asked for advice from others who had written biographies.

One church historian warned me against making Lowell into a "plaster saint." He admonished me to identify Lowell's human qualities, his faults and failings, because readers tend to identify with them. So I searched for those who were willing to go on record as disagreeing with him or even disliking him. What a difficult task! People either weren't

1. Manuella Dunn-Mascetti, *Saints: The Chosen Few* (New York: Ballantyne Books, 1994), 9.

2. *Ibid.*, 10.

willing to go on record, or they had forgiven him and forgotten his offense. Lowell had already attained a status that put him almost above criticism. Those who knew him best, however, realized that he thrived on criticism, indeed, often asked for it. (The word *criticism* has unfortunately lost its favorable connotation as welcome judgment of the good, the ability to distinguish between choices, to discriminate.)

Lowell encouraged strong opinions in his classes at the church's institute of religion adjacent to the University of Utah, and he teased out the fledgling critics among us. He often worked with and tried to hire those whose opinions ran counter to his own. This was one way to grow, to exercise the muscles of the brain.

Once when I was a bit hard on something he had written, he thanked me, then inscribed the book with: "To my most esteemed and severe critic." The fact that he was willing to subject his work to callow students like me signaled that here was a man who was secure in himself, secure enough to look beyond himself, to seek improvement even from his students. In fact, he had learned the truth of the old saying: "Teaching is the best way to learn."

The quickest to point out his failings and the quickest to forgive him was his wife, Merle Colton Bennion, who deserves a book-length biography of her own. Merle was also a teacher, counselor, and humanitarian. She worked behind the scenes, helping neighbors and friends, feeding them, caring for their children. Her hairdresser told me that when she told Merle of her plans for a trip to Japan to see her family, Merle had offered to help finance the trip. Marjorie Hinckley, wife of President Gordon B. Hinckley, served as Merle's counselor in their ward Relief Society. "Merle was a real *relief* society president. She cared a lot more about going into a home where there was a need than planning a fancy social or luncheon."³ Sister Hinckley recalled that Merle had exhibited a sixth sense when it came to knowing when families were in need.

Like other Mormon mothers, Merle felt neglected when Lowell spent so much time with others, but she forgave him. He was exciting to live with: "His mind is always churning," she said. They were high school sweethearts who never looked back once they looked into each other's eyes. As soon as he met her, he said, "I kind of concentrated on this little Merlie. She was a beautiful girl and enraptured me, as it were."⁴

After their wedding in 1928, Lowell left her for a Swiss-German mission for the LDS church, an act that caused intense loneliness and frustration for the new husband and wife. Their separation cemented their loyalty to each other, ending as it did with an idyllic honeymoon in the

3. Quoted in my book on p. 290.

4. *Ibid.*, 25.

black forest of Germany, followed by engrossing studies at three of the finest universities in Europe.

Merle shared in these studies through her services as a typist and consultant, their long walks, and the classes she sometimes attended. Their time in Vienna was cut short when Hitler closed the university, so they finished in Strasbourg where they faced the loss of their first child. When members of the church asked, "Why did God take away Brother Bennion's baby?" they explained that the death was the consequence of an unfortunate accident and could not be blamed on God. Their faith in a merciful god and in the reality of the hereafter sustained them. This period was a seeding in for later years, giving Merle strength to withstand trials to come.

Another historian gave me this advice: Never write about a living person (and it's best if his family is gone too). The history of publishing is replete with horror stories about writers who were stopped from publishing material they had taken years to gather and prepare. I was advised also that an "unauthorized biography" is best, I suppose, because the biographer can feel free to fictionalize to her heart's content.

My book was authorized, however, by Lowell and Merle, with the cooperation of their siblings, other relatives, and of their children. Any risks were greatly diminished by the modesty of my subjects. Both Lowell and Merle had a rare ability to forget themselves in larger causes with almost no need to receive credit for their work. One of Lowell's colleagues and friends, Elizabeth Haglund, put it best: "What kind of a person can care so little about his own needs and yet care so greatly and understand so deeply about how to provide help for others' needs? Lowell is a man of mystery in many ways."⁵

Lowell and Merle were able to see themselves as part of a larger whole. They agreed to point out errors and to express their feelings about anything they read, but they also agreed that the manuscript would be entirely my own responsibility. Family members read the manuscript, offered suggestions, but also agreed that ownership was mine. Lowell asked me to avoid "eulogizing him," in short, to keep from depicting him as a saint.

Lowell's missionary diary, long buried in a stuck drawer, had been lost to him until his daughter retrieved it in 1985. A wonderful depiction of missionary life, it also revealed the sexual longings and love of two young lovers. Though written in the guarded Victorian language of the time, Lowell expressed his love for his young bride and was embarrassed when I quoted from the diary. Merle, however, felt that the diary was the best way to depict their early marriage.

5. *Ibid.*, 230.

All the Bennion children read the manuscript and voiced their views. I appreciate their correction of faults and I salute them for the gracious way they allowed me to intrude on their privacy. All the Bennions and Coltons I interviewed were open and cooperative, but I suspect none of them really wanted to be written up. Lowell's willingness to trust me with his life gave me confidence, and Merle's obvious pleasure in telling their story buoyed me.

Early on I decided to speak as much as possible in Lowell's own voice and to choose for myself a relatively plain style, much like his. I believed that if I could stick to his own version of himself, I could avoid the worshipful tone of the hagiographer. I based my research outline on the fine oral history interviews Maureen Ursenbach Beecher had conducted for the LDS church historian's office. Lowell's responses to Maureen's insightful questions and his ability to organize in his head gave structure to his life. I could then fill in with interviews, archival research, and family documents. The Bennion sons excavated his institute files from his basement; they and others shared letters and documents. Frances Bennion Morgan, his youngest sister, had kept all the letters Lowell had written her over the years, and his old friend Bill Moran gave me a well-written diary and letters dating from the mid-1930s. I chose other representatives from each phase of his life to speak for themselves and stand in for hundreds of others who could have spoken.

Many of the people I interviewed spent much of the time talking about themselves, not out of egotism, but because Lowell had been a catalyst for them in their life choices. One of the founding students of Lambda Delta Sigma sent me a tape that began, "Most of my accomplishments have been in some way an attempt to repay Lowell." Lowell was a father figure as well as a teacher and counselor.

My own experience is typical. Lowell had a way of seeming to say, as he looked at me like a good parent: "I know you and I will help you magnify your gifts." Since he was firmly centered himself, he strove to create an atmosphere at the institute where the students could develop themselves and serve others at the same time. A spirit of brotherhood/sisterhood made the fraternity he founded and the courses he created a safe place to be.

In his classes Lowell often began by writing on the blackboard: "What is your philosophy of life?"—this at a time when we callow youth could only parrot the sayings of others. He looked into our eyes, and we looked into ourselves. We felt enlarged, recognized.

My son Stephen once described to me his experience at Lowell's Teton Valley Ranch for boys: "You are away from your family with a big group of boys and you thought you would be indistinguishable, but when he'd look you straight in the eye, you knew he cared about you as

an individual. He differentiated among boys. You carried back increased confidence."

Lowell understood that group experience should increase the self-esteem of the individual. He was skilled in group processes, but his target was always the individual. "Don't love me because you want to get to the Celestial Kingdom," he would say. "Love me because it is your nature to love." He taught that love is not a quantity to be doled out to the worthy, but a quality to be cultivated. With that cultivation grew a sense of our place in the universe. He described the two worlds in which we live: the world of reality or the total world of nature with its mysterious laws where the individual often feels "like an infinitesimal bit of nothingness standing on the brink of eternity."

The other world is the subjective one where each of us can carve out a life of his or her own. We can identify the things of worth to us, recognizing our own creativity, our freedoms, our strengths. When we learn to concentrate, not on the overwhelming whole, but on the things that matter most, we realize that the truly free is defined as a person who directs her energies and labor to purposes of her own choosing.

In his book *Religion and the Pursuit of Truth*, Lowell traced the distinctions between *authority* and *authoritarianism*. If any institution becomes an end in itself, where the authority in that institution discounts our ability to rule ourselves, then amen to the authority of that institution. That which we choose to give our allegiance to is what has dominion over us. We decide what that is by thinking, studying, praying, interacting with others, and experiencing life.

Lowell taught that although the faith of a child is beautiful, it may be too fragile to withstand the storms of life. He respected authority but believed that it should always be exercised in humility "with no respect for authoritarianism."⁶

I believe that during his lifetime some misunderstood Lowell's appeal, assuming that he was interested in developing a "following" of those loyal to him instead of to the church. There is no doubt that a Bennionite Branch could be easily organized, but Lowell's intent was to help people make their religion more nearly their own.

In studying the life of this saint, I asked myself the question, Who were Lowell's saints? It was easy to see that his early heroes were his father, his mother, his bishop, and David O. McKay. Later his devotion to his friend and colleague T. Edgar Lyon rivaled these.

Lowell's father, Milton Bennion, the last son of the third wife of pioneer John Bennion, was named after the poet. Milton was an educator who saw his family life as a laboratory for development. He gave his chil-

6. *Ibid.*, p. 247.

dren I.Q. tests and delighted in their individuality. Just as the child Milton ran away from kindergarten, chased but unpunished by his father, so did Lowell skip kindergarten, with Milton allowing the same freedom. When the young Lowell declared his intention to run away from home, Milton packed his bag. When Lowell was kicked by the family pony, Milton bought a bridle. When Lowell's brother refused to pray when called on, Milton decided he himself had been unfair. When Milton once administered a slap to five-year-old Lowell, the response was, "Hit me again, you big bully!" causing Milton to remark with amusement on yet another example of the "Bennion independent streak."

Reared on four acres of garden and animals, in a family of eight children, Lowell was well-parented. His patient mother was devoted to family, church work, and the arts. In her nineties, when the lights went out and her daughter offered rescue, her response was, "I'll just light a candle and play my guitar." Lowell too learned to face the darkness by lighting candles and listening to music.

He saw his father interact with authorities of church and university and learned that it was possible to develop fully within an institution. The Bennions were loyal to the church while retaining an almost mystic connection to the land. By the time he became director of the Salt Lake institute at the ripe old age of twenty-six, Lowell was ready to adopt the advice of his father's friend, David O. McKay: "Be true to yourself and loyal to the cause." Over the years Lowell worked out his own version of this: "If you have integrity and love, you have all the great virtues." To Lowell, President McKay was an example of a saint who believed in an expanding universe, who believed in progression and in possibility. He seemed to represent one of Lowell's cherished sayings, "The gospel of the church is bigger than any one man's perception of it."

President McKay was a teacher himself, an English major who quoted the poets along with the prophets. When he drove his Cadillac to Lowell's office with a personal invitation to speak at general conference priesthood meeting, Lowell felt that his brand of Mormonism had been accepted.

During the turbulent 1960s, Lowell was released from his position at the institute and President McKay did nothing to retain him. Lowell fell back on another of his well-honed maxims: "I refuse to be defeated twice, once by the circumstance and once by my attitude toward the circumstance." He was not defeated, only disappointed. The reason for his dismissal was not clear at the time, but he accepted the goals of the institution and took McKay's advice: Cross the street to the university. Years later he would accept the wisdom of this choice, justified in his conviction that McKay always had Lowell's best interests in mind.

Although many felt a great loss, Lowell's world expanded into what Gene England calls his "central contribution to Mormonism," his humanitarian prophetic voice.

Lowell's over-arching example was always Jesus Christ. He believed in Christ as a real person who combined in his being all the qualities humans can aspire to. Lowell was a devout Christian, a devout Mormon, while always recognizing and learning from the saints of other religions.

While studying for his Ph.D. degree, Lowell also internalized the works of a secular saint, Max Weber, who had mapped the study of institutions and their bureaucracies. This far-seeing thinker also thought about religion and prophets. He called Buddha an *exemplar* prophet who led by personal example; Isaiah an *emissary* prophet who transmitted messages from God. Lowell added his own assessment: Jesus Christ was both *Exemplar* and *Emissary*.

Lowell chose this great German sociologist as his dissertation subject and one of his saints because "He was the most creative mind I'd yet come across." Weber died thirteen years before Lowell took up his studies in Europe, and Talcott Parsons was just beginning to translate Weber into English at the time.

I approached one of Lowell's former students who was completing her doctorate in sociology: "Was Lowell the first to write a full-length study of Weber in English?" as Eugene England had claimed. Laurie DiPadova, whose essay on Lowell and Max Weber appears in this same issue of *Dialogue*, stoked up her computer, searched the literature, and turned up a title by a long-forgotten British scholar who had not looked at Weber's whole work. Lowell's *Max Weber's Methodology*, published in Paris in 1933, has now been footnoted by almost all the major Weber scholars ever since its publication in an edition of one hundred copies. This led DiPadova into further studies about Weber and Lowell. She concluded that "Bennion's was the first systematic treatment in English of the broad body of Weber's work ... based on his own translations." Though his ideas would not now be considered new, at the time his work was "not only original but momentous." Parsons himself called it the "most comprehensive secondary account in English."

Lowell incorporated Weber into his own thinking, giving shape to his holistic concepts of life and learning. Weber taught Lowell how to tell the difference between value judgments and facts. By studying Weber's concept of the Ideal Type, Lowell found ways to analyze and then to synthesize. His ability to think through and around every aspect of a subject, presenting it in easy-to-understand terms can be enjoyed in his lesson manuals and his books.

Other secular saints in Lowell's life were Albert Schweitzer, with his "reverence for life," and Gandhi, with his "Live simply so that others

may simply live." During his mission Lowell also made the acquaintance of the great German poets Schiller and Goethe, which led to a love of Beethoven and his rendering of Schiller's "Ode to Joy." They all became a lifetime consolation. Lowell memorized Goethe's maxims "Whatever you do or dream you can, begin it," "Boldness has genius, power and magic in it," and "Whatever from you heritage is lent, earn it anew to really possess it."

The scholars, the philosophers, the poets, the composers helped him compose his definition of joy as something much greater than mere entertainment or fun—part sorrow and the deepest delight in all things.

Lowell was happy to be a Latter-day Saint, a title with ambition and hope in it. The only other title he liked, besides father or husband, was "brother." In my day his nickname was "Brother B." He often quoted Micah: "What doth the Lord require of thee than to do Justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with thy God." He achieved a measure of wholeness by balancing the justice/mercy theme in his own life, activated by the phrase "walk with." His ambition was to work alongside his God, not performing, not lagging behind, nor running ahead.

I honored his wishes and left the Saint out of the title, but I can't keep people from thinking of him as a saint, and as a prophet like the Old Testament moral prophets he loved—Amos, Hosea, Micah. He was not a prophet who reads the future or speaks for the church, but one who cries repentance and stands his ground on the individual conscience. His prophetic voice is at its best in such essays as "The Weightier Matters," published by *Sunstone* and republished in Gene England's collection of Lowell's writings. I recommend a re-reading.⁷

Levi Peterson wrote a moving personal essay about his biography of Juanita Brooks called, "My Subject, My Sister." Lowell, my subject, my brother, thank you for sharing your life with me.

7. Lowell L. Bennion, "The Weightier Matters," in *The Best of Lowell L. Bennion: Selected Writings: 1928-1988*, ed. Eugene England (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1988), 115.