

Depression and the Brethren of the Priesthood

Mack Patten

Editor's note: With this essay Dialogue continues its series on the relationship between the Church and persons with disabilities.

During the last few years, I have come to feel that, if I were in charge of Church jargon, we would get rid of the words *blessings*, *rewards*, *punishments*, and *tests*. In place of those words, we would begin using “lessons to be learned.” I have also come to believe that some venue, or arena, or, at least, some safe place should be available where members could voice their concerns—without guilt—about their distresses, their disappointments, and their frustrations at what is going on in their lives.

I have in mind a place or situation such as I found in my home ward when I returned from the Austrian Mission in 1963. At that moment, my ward had five other elders who had served in German-speaking countries. What a relief it was for me to learn that I was not the only elder in the world who had seen more of the devil in his mission than of Heavenly Father. In my mission, for example, there was the investigator whose doctor had prescribed coffee for her heart condition. We had promised her that if she would sacrifice her coffee, the Lord would bless her. Instead, she had a mild heart attack. That was also where President Henry D. Moyle yelled at the assembled missionaries from our entire mission for not accomplishing the same thing that England, Scotland, and Ireland had done with what became known as kiddie baptisms. President Moyle then went on to humiliate our mission president by telling President Smith to sit down and be quiet when he attempted to explain some things. Yes, following my mission, sitting in the foyer during sacrament meeting and sharing my experiences with the other elders helped, I believe, to keep me

active in the Church. As I say, people need a safe place like that to express their frustrations and disappointments.

Since about 1980, I have been plagued by two serious problems that have more than once driven me to desperate measures regarding my faith and belief as well as my own emotional sanity. One is my physical health, the other my emotional health. I cannot pinpoint when my depression began. My physical condition began in the early 1980s and has now progressed to the point when I can no longer use my legs. I live in a care center where I often lie in bed waiting for an aide to change my dirty diaper, wondering if this is what Heavenly Father really wants for me.

My life was following the path of the ordinary Mormon boy in Salt Lake City during the 1950s and the 1960s—filling a mission, attending the university, getting married. The first two parts were easy; the third part, getting married, led me into experiences that I had never dreamed about and had never been prepared for in Primary, priesthood meetings, or four years of seminary. The purpose of this essay, then, is to share with *Dialogue* readers my experiences with these two debilitating diseases: depression and IBM (myositis), and to try to explain how my own faith and the actions of other Church members—including my family—have played both a positive and a negative role in the development of those two diseases and their effects on me.

My marriage was unique in many ways, the most striking being that on the day I was married, I inherited three children from my wife's first marriage: two boys and a baby girl. Elaine and her former husband had separated before she knew she was pregnant; following her attorney's advice, she did not proceed with the divorce until after the baby's birth. Allison was born in October, and Elaine and I married the following March. I still remember the quizzical looks of jewelers as we walked up and down Main Street in Salt Lake City looking for a wedding band while carrying a three-month-old baby in our arms. I had wanted to marry since returning from my mission in 1963 but had been sadly unsuccessful in convincing any young lady to accept me. My wife had just gone through a painful divorce; consequently, we faced some serious struggles in creating our own family. Nevertheless, for the next ten years, five children were born at almost regular two-year intervals, making a total of eight children when we finally stopped—six boys and two girls. Elaine was a stay-at-home mother and my profession—a public school teacher—didn't put big bucks

in our bank account, so I worked the typical extra jobs to help supplement our income. But it never seemed to be enough.

We always ran out of money about a week and a half before the end of the month, putting a strain on everything. Then, in September 1983, eighteen months following the birth of our last child, our second son decided to climb onto his friend's motorcycle—not a wise decision. He had ridden around the block once when the motorcycle slid on some loose gravel. Unable to control the large bike, Matt apparently hit the curb, throwing him off the bike. According to the people who witnessed the scene, the motorcycle flipped up into the air and came down on Matt's head. Following a frantic phone call from a ward member, Elaine and I jumped into the car and followed the ambulance the two blocks to the accident, arriving just in time to watch as our son died in a pool of his own blood. Perhaps that day was the beginning of the end of the marriage, or perhaps it was merely one event that contributed to the end of the marriage.

We struggled on for almost ten more years, the relationship and the home environment deteriorating at a slow, but painful rate. Sometime during those years, I wrote at the top of a filled journal, "The Destruction of the Mormon Family," then threw it into the burning fire in the fireplace, not wanting anyone to read about how bad things had become. Surprisingly, we were still able to send our oldest son on a mission, even in the middle of the mess at home. Who really knows why a temple marriage comes to an end, especially when both partners had remained active in the Church, attended the temple, filled callings, and tried to have family home evening and daily prayers? Three sets of marriage counselors had little effect on us. Talks with the bishop led nowhere. Priesthood blessings seemed useless.

Finally, when our youngest son was ten, I filed for divorce and have suffered devastating guilt ever since at being the one who broke up our "eternal family." Playing the blame game would be too easy here, so I'll stay away from that. However, I will say that none of our children ever blamed me for the divorce; and during the next several years, each of the children chose to come and live with me. They all agreed, at least in talking with me, that the divorce was better than the constant arguing and bickering at home. And since then, each of our five sons has filled an honorable mission. Of our two daughters, one married in the temple and has

remained in the Church; the other has struggled with personal and physical problems most of her life.

I am reminded of the story in the New Testament when Christ's disciples asked him, "Who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?" (John 9:2). While I'm not totally comfortable with the reply that he had been born blind so "that the works of God should be made manifest in him," I find the first part of the answer—"Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents"—very significant.

My disease was misdiagnosed in about 1984 as polymyositis. According to the muscle biopsy, so the doctor said, I had had the disease for five years. Although the protocols I followed for the next four years had no harmful effects, neither did they have any beneficial results. Sometime in 1988, my rheumatologist told me of a research study being conducted at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland, that was focused on my disease. Thereafter, I became a research patient, traveling back and forth until about 1992. The first month I was there, the doctor established that I had, instead of polymyositis, sporadic inclusion body myositis, a nonfatal but also nontreatable auto-immune disease that is slowly but steadily destroying all the striated muscles in my body. I have gone from normal ambulatory abilities to walking with a cane, then crutches, then being in a push wheelchair, and finally in a motorized wheelchair.

As I write this essay during the fall of 2006, my legs are useless. I cannot transfer from the chair to the bed or anything else without help. I cannot use the toilet without help. I can feel the muscles in my arms and shoulders growing weaker. Although I am still able to type, I have lost most of my fine motor skills. I can no longer make a fist with just one hand. Consequently, I moved into the care center during the summer of 2006 to ease the burden on my family of taking care of me. Two months later, I underwent a procedure of having my esophagus dilated to ease the difficulty in swallowing. I have been hospitalized twice with aspirating pneumonia.

The disease, along with its results, has sorely tested my faith. I wish I could be more patient. I can say, however, that two days after some rather intense prayer for patience, two images came into my mind that gave me relief: one was the image of Mother Teresa moving among the poor, diseased, and outcast in the hovels in India. The other was of Joseph Smith in Liberty Jail, from which Doctrine and Covenants 121 comes. If they

could do it, so could I. The fellow across the hall from me has cystic fibrosis; three men here are amputees; on the floor above mine are those with dementia. I am now one of “those” whom I used to serve on Sundays, providing music and gospel messages. But now I don’t go home following the services; I am already at home.

As for my loss of emotional health, I am aware that *depression* is one of the dirty words of Mormon culture, usually placed on the same level as *divorce*, *abuse*, and *homosexuality*, somewhere under the coat rack or in a corner of the lavatory. Not only is it a dirty word but when we do read personal stories or retold stories of depression, especially in Church publications, we usually read about women and depression. Seldom does any publication deal with depression in men. It’s as though a valiant priesthood holder is somehow exempt from that disease; or at least, if he has it, he should be able to overcome it through faith and priesthood blessings—one of the comfortable myths of Latter-day Saints.

However, depression, like so many other trials and tribulations, is no respecter of gender, age, or faithfulness. Emeritus Seventy Alexander B. Morrison wrote in *Valley of Sorrow* that even children as young as two or three years of age can suffer from depression. I am now a sixty-four-year-old believing high priest, and I first recognized depression in my late thirties and early forties.

As I have said, I was a public school teacher, my wife and I had a large family, and she didn’t work outside the home. Even when I worked two jobs during the school year and an additional job during the summer, there was never really enough money. The financial stress, with its attendant marital difficulties, combined, I believe, to begin my bouts with depression, which were increased by Matt’s death in that meaningless motorcycle accident. But because I was busy most of the time, I didn’t really pay much attention to what I now know were symptoms of depression.

About five years ago, after being divorced for almost ten years, I started falling deeper and deeper into the black void. I had raised the family. I lived alone and spent most of my time alone. When my next-to-last son left for the mission field, I learned of the Church service missionary program and applied for it. Because of my background in English, the brother in the archives section of the Church History Department was eager for me to work with him. Happily, I began my assignment in the Church Office Building at the beginning of the year. Three months later, the first of the serious depression bouts hit, and I went down like the pro-

verbial rock in the lake. One day on the way to the office, I simply started crying for no reason. Nevertheless, by the time I arrived there, I had pulled myself together and was able to complete the assigned tasks for the day. That night, however, I cried myself to sleep. The next day I had to call in sick, knowing that I wasn't sick, but also knowing that I couldn't face anything or anyone. I think I stayed in bed until about 3:00 P.M., when I got so hungry that I had to get up to eat. That was one scary day.

A few months later, while trying to figure out something on the computer, I asked one of the brothers there to explain to me how to do it. Instead of explaining it to me, he simply did it, then continued with his own work. I felt an almost uncontrollable anger taking over. I wasn't stupid; I wasn't illiterate; I wanted to know how to do the process so that I wouldn't have to ask again the next time. I went to my supervisor, told him I wasn't feeling well, and then went home where I sat in a chair becoming angrier and angrier with the man who didn't take the time to explain to me how to do what I wanted to do. During the next six years of Church service missionary work, I was like a "bouncy ball"—up sometimes, but also down sometimes, with no clear pattern that I could distinguish. I finally told my supervisor that I was bi-polar, and that I was becoming more and more unstable. He was very understanding, telling me that he wanted me to continue working as my health allowed.

Certainly my physical disease has been the dominating factor of my life the last five to eight years. It has also contributed to my depression as much as anything else. I know that, barring some unforeseen death-causing incident, I will eventually be totally bedridden, completely dependent on other people for everything.

Four years ago, following an unpleasant scene with two of my married children, in a fit of petulance, self-pity, and anger, I overdosed on some sleeping pills, planning to wake up in a different existence than the one I had fallen asleep in. However, that didn't happen. I woke up in the psychiatric ward of the University Hospital. My children had discovered what I had done (I had left detailed information and instructions regarding wills, house titles, etc., on the computer), and had taken me to the hospital. A psychiatrist saw me and prescribed some medication. During the four days I was there, various counselors spoke with me, I visited various group therapies, and I seemed to have few problems. The staff at the hospital made an appointment for me to see a counselor at LDS Family Services. I can't say enough good about him; he was totally accepting, com-

pletely sympathetic, and compassionate. However, he was not a cure-all; I often had to call him after hours to talk with him on the phone when I knew I was not safe. He never failed me. Unfortunately, whoever was in charge at Family Services decided he was needed more somewhere in the South than he was needed in Salt Lake, and so I lost one of the threads that was connecting me to sanity and stability.

I could go on and on with stories of my continued depression, but I really don't think they would add much to what I've written here. I have to confess that I have reservations about priesthood blessings; my physical experiences have dented my spiritual nature enough that I am very cautious of saying that priesthood blessings have helped me. Perhaps they have, but I just don't recognize the results. I continue to suffer severe depression; I take my medicine, try to eat well, try not to be alone all the time, and I do say my prayers, unorthodox though they may be. Since my first experience in the psychiatric ward, I have been there twice more, with no assurance that I won't be there again.

When I tell people that I suffer depression, most of them have no idea how to respond; consequently they begin ignoring or avoiding me. I do, however, have a wonderful home teacher who is willing to listen to almost anything I say. He is a great comfort to me. My children do what they can for me, with their busy schedules and families to take care of. In following President Hinckley's advice to read the Book of Mormon, I have discovered a scripture, Alma 7:12, that has taken on new meaning for me: ". . . that his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities." Christ has suffered all so that he can understand our suffering. When I concentrate on this scripture, I am filled with a sense of hope and faith that eventually I will no longer have to suffer because Christ, knowing and feeling my despair, will have removed the suffering from me. As for now, I have learned that even believing priesthood holders are subject to the demons of depression.