

A BOOK AND BEYOND

Dianne Dibb Forbis—Retired, Department of English

Why did I splatter unpleasantness out into the public? After musing upon the matter, a part of me wants to apologize. I'm disposed also to be embarrassed. Showing shakiness is audacious and obnoxious.

TERRIBLE TREMORS

When I wrote the book about my husband's decline, the effort was one of desperation. He was dying of Alzheimer's. The everyday jolts filled the days with gray debris.

When I wrote the book about my husband's decline, the effort was one of desperation. He was dying of Alzheimer's. The everyday jolts filled the days with gray debris. I was so depressed. When bad times come, one often moves with the rhythms most familiar—those which have been ingrained through inclination, education (formal and/or informal), associations. So I wrote poetry. I needed desperately to have total control over one little corner of my quavery life. So I wrote, then I organized the poetry in a format of chronological thumps and emotions. An opportunity opened to publish the sorrowful writings. Was my motive altruistic: help others in like situations? I doubt it. I craved a larger audience for my screams. Let others feel bad for poor Dianne. It wasn't enough to have a few friends and family members listening.

But after the printing and distribution of the book, I did get feedback to indicate that personal mumblings had struck a chord with readers who needed to know it was okay to yell and protest and feel anger. I even got a call from someone in Texas who had read the book and wanted me to know it allowed her to not be so hard on herself. She was tending an Alzheimer's-afflicted family member and was sick of it all.

OH, NO! NOT A FULL EARTHQUAKE!

My dear mother had died in July 2000. Husband Al died on the last day of August 2000, when the book was in the final stage of production. So I'm about a year and one-half away from the deaths of my mother and my spouse and the birth of the book. A few people have asked searching questions concerning my motivation(s) for creating the book. And is there a compelling epilogue? I don't have clear-cut answers. How long does one need to move on from being stunned before lucidity comes?

A second ride on the cycle of hurt and dismay began when I was diagnosed with supposed incurable cancer of the lining of the lung. This bolt of wicked lightening hit me approximately six months after Al's death. I was now really really mad. I wanted my mother back. I was still angry at my husband for getting Alzheimer's and dying. Now I was ready to be angry with him again—if, in any way, he was making requests for

me to join him in the next sphere. I was incensed that I didn't get some fun time after the battering in one arena of affliction. A separate flaring upset was the realization that I wasn't being humble. I still wanted to be the author of my own life's drama. I wasn't willing to throw on the altar my most cherished creations: nice scripts and alternate scripts I authored over the years to move me with some semblance of majesty through all chapters of my life on earth. Now I'd been thrown completely out of my self-constructed theatre.

The new stage for drama was brooding and alien. And medical people were projecting a last foreboding scene with Hospice players trooping in to fill roles. I'd need to be near family members. I was obliged to sell my house in Rexburg and burrow into a Bountiful, Utah, basement apartment of a married daughter. Like it or not, I would have to adjust to a household with five small children—going on six. (Could these aimless and boisterous kids be related to me!?) I abruptly ended a 20-year marketing career. I was constrained to let go of the enjoyable ten-year experience of teaching Ricks English classes as an adjunct faculty member. I left my dear, familiar Rexburg ward which gave me love and egocentric warmth from assumed prestige of being the gospel doctrine teacher.

The Alzheimer's hell had already been beyond what I supposed was a fair share of suffering. But, ah, how often we get reminders from Church leaders that our hazy views of life ahead are likely not on the mark. The perks won't fill our appetites for wonderful. Trials might go beyond the bounds of what we would consider fair and reasonable.

**The Alzheimer's
hell had already
been beyond what I
supposed was a fair
share of suffering.**

Too many of us believe that because of our obedience to the principles of the gospel, we should get what we want to have.... I never have had the things that I really wanted.¹

A superficial view of this life... will not do, lest we mistakenly speak of this mortal experience only as coming here to get a body, as if we were merely picking up a suit at the cleaners. Or, lest we casually recite how we have come here to be proved, as if a few brisk push-ups and deep knee bends would do.²

Yet I had thought my luck would hold. I would be an exception to the horrible-trials trend. I couldn't shake the idea that surely I had erred. I had brought devastation upon self by not being noble.

SORTING DEBRIS

So now a multiplied press of guilt developed. I'd been a lousy caregiver as Al slumped and dulled. I was too human, too selfish, too feeble in my ability to dole out charity. Further, somewhere along the recent littered way, I'd largely let go of tasks attached to major stewardships: Dianne as mother, as grandmother. I saw myself as a sorry solitary second-class citizen of the

Kingdom. And I'd been backed into a corner. Was the Lord now telling me I was a blot of pride that needed to be seared a bit and quickly moved onward to a more well defined, beyond-the-veil field of experience?

Prayer and pondering brought nothing but tiny pulsations of recall. Nothing new. Bear in mind, Dianne, those major themes in scripture: have faith, strive for perfection, endure to the end, defer to the Lord and his omniscience, et. al. I was hung up on digesting the man-less-than-dust reality (see Helaman 12:7, 8). My tears made mud of my dust cloud of circumstances. After weeks and months of mucking through trenches of trials, made the more murky by stubbornness, I started giving myself permission to think of myself as worthy. I guess it was an act of desperation—Oh, please can I again like this Dianne person a little bit?! The alternatives were terrible.

PICKING UP SOME PIECE

So I began trying to know myself better. What was okay about me? I realized that during recent difficulties of four or five years I'd considered writing times as impious recesses which took time away from the serious business of following lists and dusting every crevice every day. Hmm. I was condemning as sinful something I loved. I grabbed this concrete issue which troubled me and took it to the place of prayer.

**I began thinking
about King David. In
spite of his manifold
responsibilities,
he spent time
writing. He wrote
of his despair. He
didn't hold back in
describing distress.**

I began thinking about King David. In spite of his manifold responsibilities, he spent time writing. He wrote of his despair. He didn't hold back in describing distress.

Why standest thou afar off, O Lord?³

Keep me as the apple of the eye, hide me in the shadow of they wings.⁴

Thou hast shewed thy people hard things: thou hast made us to drink the wine of astonishment.⁵

I am gone like the shadow when it declineth: I am tossed up and down as the locust.⁶

I rediscovered a quotation I had placed at the beginning of my journals decades ago. The admonition comes from Spencer W. Kimball.

Get a notebook, my young folks, a journal that will last through all time, and maybe the angels may quote from it for eternity. Begin today and write in it your goings and comings, your deepest thoughts, your achievements and your *failures* [emphasis added], your associations and your triumphs, your impressions and your testimonies. Remember, the Savior chastised those who failed to record important events.⁷

So was I justified in writing a book about Al? Was it okay to not spend that writing energy in delivering more circumspect care to my husband

in his sorry state? I finally admitted I've felt guilt about having written what I sometimes think of as "the wretched greenish book."

I needed to stop handling textures of guilt. I've always been inclined to grab post-explosion powder in mid-air, to clutch handfuls tightly, to poke at the dander. No one was telling me I had to gather and finger leftovers. I could stop grasping past and reach toward something else.

DUST SETTLES

So I made the decision to start enjoying what parts of life were good. Movements of motherhood and grandmotherhood took on a little bit of lilt. And I saw more clearly a fuller scope in the man-less-than-dust statements. Studying for a class on the Creation, I reviewed again the circumstances of Moses declaring: "I know that man is nothing, which thing I never had supposed."⁸ He had just seen world-without-ends splendor. Certainly he was stunned by the knowledge.

Recently I've chosen to read some scientific books. They increase my awe of God and His work. An analogy which boggles my mind is as follows: "If our galaxy, the Milky Way, were shrunk to the size of North America, our solar system (the Sun and its nine planets) would fit inside a coffee cup."⁹ "We now know that our galaxy is only one of some hundred thousand million [in our universe] that can be seen using modern telescopes."¹⁰ When the Lord speaks about human beings as dust, it's a statement of fact. He's not demeaning us nor trumpeting His own glorious abilities. But the fullness of gospel truth assures us that—dusty though we may be—we are yet cherished children of God. And we have only the slightest inkling of personal possibilities.

REACHING FOR CLARITY

After floundering through Alzheimer's and initial cancer experiences, I arrived at a point where I was able to handle a trip to the temple. It was my first in almost a year. I expected the event to be dramatic. I would be taking my battered and fatigued body to the pinnacle place available on Earth. I'd be cool. I wouldn't demand special attention; but, surely, the odds were good that I would receive a sign or a personal revelation. Whew.

Well, the temple environment gave peace and comfort. Ordinary matters proceeded at an ordinary pace. The message was merely: Dianne, there are many others carrying burdens. And could I deny such? Of course not. There was a bulky prayer roll on the altar. One name (mine) in big sparkling letters was not spotlighted for spiritual business of the day.

Most people have a time when life-altering experiences turn their worlds upside down. The devastation of 9/11 recently hit the United States. "Those [Twin Towers] were my local mountains,' a New Yorker

I finally admitted
I've felt guilt about
having written what
I sometimes think
of as "the wretched
greenish book."

says, but the mountains were laid low.”¹¹ Through subsequent events I was tutored by the media to become acutely aware of the dire state of innocent children in Afghanistan. And this reminded me of my privileged temporal circumstances and opportunities in comparison to have nots in so many under-developed countries in the world. “Sometimes I wonder if in our latter-day world of ease—in our world of microwave ovens and cell phones and air-conditioned cars and comfortable homes—I wonder if we ever learn to acknowledge our daily dependence upon the enabling power of the atonement... You and I in a moment of weakness may cry out, ‘No one understands. No one knows.’ No human being, perhaps, knows. But the Son of God perfectly knows and understands, for He felt and bore our burdens before we ever did.”¹²

**I grudgingly report
that I do see the
value of trials
and tribulations.**

I grudgingly report that I do see the value of trials and tribulations. During halcyon days when I came across certain passages from “The Four Zoas” by William Blake I was impressed with Blake’s ability to take an idea and make it into memorable images. Now I read and pause. I reflect, hold back tears.

What is the price of Experience? Do men buy it
for a song?
Or wisdom for a dance in the street? No, it is
bought with the price
of all that a man hath....
It is an easy thing to triumph in the summer’s
sun
And in the vintage and to sing on the waggon
loaded with corn.
It is an easy thing to talk of patience to the
afflicted,
To speak the laws of prudence to the houseless
wanderer....
It is an easy thing to rejoice in the tents of
prosperity.

Can I explain how to deal with suffering? Hah! I wouldn’t attempt to conjecture. It’s every person for himself in wrestling with these blasted customized tests (or whatever happenstance homework is handed out). I’m still the student wishing to drop out of bitter curriculum and enroll in a picnic field trip.

I guess tradition and testimony keep me from fleeing.

My faith reached threadbare. I needed to look at the weave and decide whether I wanted to even retain ownership of this fabled fabric. Ask the hard questions. Choose the answers. What are the best answers? “Clearly, the Christian faith is dependent upon acceptance of a divine miracle

that took place on Easter morning, for which there is no evidence.”¹³ I’ve decided (at least, at this point) faith is the best robe for an exultant eternity. I throw in the conditional “at this point” phrase only because I’ve become so acutely aware of my fallibility.

I climbed an undulating hill and wrote a book. Then I was knocked into a bog. I eventually stood and limped forward. I inch along, hoping no more big tremors will fault and rent what’s underfoot. Prayer becomes more specific. I read about faith and listen with increased interest and capacity. I learn new aspects of faith. In the October 2001 General Conference, Elder Robert F. Orton made reference to Galatians 5:6 and noted, “Love is the driving force behind faith.”¹⁴ Likely I’ve heard this before. Apparently it didn’t make a dent in my memory. I’ve been dented now. I’m still capable of moving around. Give me a worthy destination and I may get there: a brighter field of faith, a more lush meadow of love, an art museum in Toledo, Spain, the apartment of my 92-year-old dad in St. George, Utah.

If you will tell me why the fen
appears impassable, I then
will tell you why I think that I
can get across it if I try.¹⁵

NOTES:

1. *Matthew Cowley Speaks* (Salt Lake: Deseret Book, 1976), 267.
2. Neal Maxwell, “Willing to Submit,” *Ensign* (May 1985), 70.
3. Psalm 10:1.
4. Psalm 17:8.
5. Psalm 60:3.
6. Psalm 109:23.
7. Spencer W. Kimball, “The Angels May Quote from It,” *New Era* (October 1975), 5.
8. Moses 1:10.
9. David M. Schwartz, *Q is for Quark* (Berkeley: Tricycle Press, 2001), 53.
10. Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*, (New York: Bantam Book, 1998), 38.
11. Nancy Gibbs, “Mourning in America,” *Time* (24 September 2001), 21.
12. David A. Bednar, “In the Strength of the Lord,” *BYU-Idaho Devotional*, 8 January 2002.
13. Statement by Robert Millet in Lawrence Wright, “Lives of the Saints,” *The New Yorker* (21 January 2002), 51.
14. Robert F. Orton, “The First and Great Commandment,” *Ensign* (November 2001), 81.
15. Marianne Moore, “I May, I Might, I Must,” *Poetry U.S.A.* (New York: Scholastic Book Services, 1968), 36.