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## THIS SIDE OF THE TRACTS

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# A QUORUM MEMOIR

By Michael Hicks



A quorum is not just assignments, socials, shared labor, lessons, or even controversies. It is a cast of characters.

WHEN A PIONEER woman broke a piece of china, I am told, she threw the fragments down into her well so that the pieces might filter the spring. I feel the same about the memories of my old quorum: don't toss them casually into the hot sun of scrutiny, but put them down in some small place where they can do some good. So I hesitate to have this slight memoir read by so many who don't know me or who don't care. But if it helps some future elders quorum president, it will have done its job.

Here is the gist of it: my elders quorum was like a dream that never came true, some-

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thing I wanted it to be that it never could: half Utopian classroom, half Parnassian game.

The first priesthood meeting I attended at my university ward in the Midwest literally was a game—"Gospel Jeopardy," they called it. We had to guess the questions to answer cards stuck on the blackboard. It was our half of the room against the other half and our side won, despite my grand *faux pas*—I chose "LDS Periodicals" for 100 points, but to an answer I no longer recall I provided the question, "What was the *Frontier Guardian*?" instead of the correct question, "What was the *Western Standard*?" I learned then this would not be an easy quorum.

I also learned that first Sunday in August that our quorum president was on vacation

for the summer. No one seemed to mind; the little flock seemed happy to go un-shepherded. All I heard about the president was that he had a beard and that he majored in Latin American literature. I envisioned a kind of Che Guevara in a three-piece, with a priesthood manual folded into his copy of *The Socialist Worker*. The real man, it turned out, was lean and blond, wore glasses, and talked less like a revolutionary than a management training seminar teacher. The first week he was back I went head to head with him during our quorum class, arguing over whether or not Joseph's teachings should be considered scripture (I took the affirmative). Though I was belligerent, he remained airy—he had no time for public clashes. Later, after many long discussions with him, in which we agreed about most everything, I found out that despite his major he didn't especially like Latin American literature, though he was proud when Marquez won the Nobel Prize.

Our meeting room at the Institute building was rather spare and, well, *institutional*, with grey metal chairs and a persistent hum of fluorescent lights. (I never was able to persuade anyone to turn off the lights and open the drapes.) There was no piano, and since meetings began at 9 A.M., we growled hymns a cappella while our wives, two rooms away, sang sunnily with a piano chiming behind them. From the nursery, records of "Old McDonald" and "My Grandfather's Clock" seeped through the walls. Our blackboards slid on runners, and could cover one another, which made them ideal for Gospel Jeopardy. But we never played that game again after the first week.

We didn't because, when that fall came, the old quorum president was retired to the high council and our new president called two new teachers. The first, Dave, was fast on his feet and could improvise a tolerable discussion, which he often had to do because the second, Chuck, rarely showed up for his appointed lessons. On one typical Sunday, Dave got up and began airing his beefs with Ken Woodward's latest *Newsweek* article, a tough piece on the LDS missionary system. That started a big fight over just how right or wrong Woodward was or wasn't. Some of us, sympathetic to the article, felt Dave was misrepresenting the article and finally one brother got up, pulled the article off of the Institute bulletin board and made Dave read it to the class. None of this was in the manual.

That's the way classes were in those days. They were either straight out of the manual—when Chuck showed up—or straight

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out of left field. So we went from Sunday to Sunday, from boredom to exhilaration and back again, never knowing what to expect, except that we never expected Gospel Jeopardy—it was just too much trouble for anyone to plan.

The new president, whose wide, childlike eyes peered from a beefy, Brigham-bearded face, was philosophical about all this. He was less concerned about the weekly meetings than about keeping the home teaching afloat at about 75% or so. He was even more concerned about having first-rate socials. I recall one delightful dinner where he barbecued chicken halves in his backyard in the rain. Almost no chicken was eaten, and the leftovers were given to ward members on welfare (which included us). But the dinner ended with a bright discussion in his basement library, with lots of talk about raising children, behaviorism, and Ken Woodward's articles.

Our president always cared that everyone in the quorum feel just like he did: free, comfortable, unpressured, at home and at ease more than at attention. To our bishop that was a bitter pill. A formal, anxiety-ridden, yet extraordinarily likeable man, the bishop was just about to take a position as a department chairman at another university. Dismayed by our president's easygoing approach, the bishop urged the stake president to call a new quorum president before he left for his new position. By inspiration, he recommended me as the replacement.

Every newly appointed priesthood leader approaches his task with a zeal to overthrow the old order. It is not that he dislikes the old order so much as that he feels that he has to have something to do. And he has to vent his nerves, which have been overheated by the admonitions that came with his call. So I began to dismantle what our quorum had been and erect something new, or perhaps something very old: swimming in my head were blurry visions of the School of the Prophets and Nauvoo's golden days, all presided over by the beneficent countenances of my heroes B. H. Roberts, Orson Pratt, and (only occasionally) Brigham Young.

I got pretty definite about what should happen in the quorum: a formal curriculum for meetings, with lessons, outlines, and handouts planned months ahead; diligent home teaching and personal priesthood interviews (for aesthetic reasons I always refused to call them "PPI's"); and the continued and expanded independence of the quorum from the ward. This last ideal seemed treacherous in a one-quorum student ward. But it was a good response to a domineering new

bishop who was bent on overturning his old order. (We knew we were in trouble when he began referring to the quorum as one of the "auxiliaries.")

We clashed with the new bishop over two matters. First, he wanted 100 percent home teaching at almost any cost and so instituted a program of private intimidation of negligent home teachers. Second, he tried to remove quorum funds from our account and put them into the ward account. The details of these controversies have slid out of my mind. But I recall vividly the fierceness with which my counselors protested to me of these and other, smaller matters, and how diplomatically I tried to sound these complaints to stake ears. I felt glad when one stake leader confided to me that the stake presidency wanted me in this position precisely to counterbalance the iron hand of the new bishop. But by then I had already decided that was why the Lord had called me.

If that sounds like sour grapes, I should add that the bishop and I got along pretty well considering our sometimes different approaches to Church government. A powerfully built former football coach, he had a big heart and could give about the best counsel of any bishop I ever knew. And unlike many bishops, ours was slow to interfere in the quorum instruction, which was crucial to our new order.

We studied far-flung topics from Church history, the arts and the Church, and practical matters like basic accounting and how to buy meat. Some of the brethren who arrived at school in August 1981 found that their first priesthood lesson in our ward—given by a veterinary student—was on selecting and caring for pets. I insisted that we have no teacher, but rather call specialists for each lesson. When people defaulted on their lessons—unavoidable sometimes, since lessons were assigned three to six months ahead—I usually took the helm, which I loved. At one point we actually forbid quorum members to bring manuals to meeting, because, as their covers said, they were only "personal study guides"—not group crutches, I said. With this and other tactics I made a fetish of quorum instruction. This fetish came from my belief that meetings are the most immediate experience of a priesthood quorum, the things that most color the way we look at the notion of the quorum itself. If we could get these right—make them dignified, informative, strenuous, dramatic—we would be a long way toward getting the quorum right.

We knew we were getting something right when one brother ended the hallway vigil he had kept for two years and, for the first time

in anyone's memory, set foot into our meeting room. He came pretty much all the time after that.

Since I am basically shy, I tend to shun socials. Only once while I was quorum president did I plan one—a mock-Polysophical Society meeting, complete with dim floor lamps, Mozart horn solos, readings in Greek and Hebrew, and a strange lecture by an economics student on "Why the United Order is Economically Unsound." The rest of the socials that we had—an inside bratwurst dinner and an outside barbecue (with some disastrously fermented punch) are the two that come to mind—the counselors had to plan. To their credit they and the quorum secretary never complained (to me) about the loads of work I left at their doorsteps, which included not only the socials, but the sports and the sacrament. But none of those formalities mattered so much as furniture moving, male quartets for stake meetings, board games, shared sack lunches, and gratis television, bike, and engine repairs. That was fellowship to us.

For anyone who doesn't know it: secretaries are heroes. Our first quorum secretary did all the regular recording of attendance, minutes, and so on, not to mention representing the single member's point of view in our presidency meetings. When he was suddenly excommunicated, we all became much closer to him than before—such are the ironies of religious fellowship. We requested and got a second secretary, but he was quickly released to become the ward single adult representative. One of our high councilman's sons, a wiry long-distance runner, was the third and last. His work became the thread that held our presidency together, since we met at best twice a month, and never remembered very well what had been assigned and reported from meeting to meeting. He wrote everything down and sometimes that's the best thing that one can do.

But one quickly learns that a quorum is not just assignments, socials, shared labor, lessons, or even controversies. It is a cast of characters. And so, it is the players of this troupe and the roles they played that lodge most firmly in my thoughts. I think of Kent, whose voice often rose from the back of the quorum to debunk some miracle tale in the Church; of Roger, the psychology major who taught me self-hypnosis on his fat black recliner chair, trying to get me through a horrible depression; of Chuan, a semi-mystical Asian, who plucked his index finger with a rose thorn right after his baptism to demonstrate the duality of beauty and pain, and who, when asked to give a priesthood

lesson, delivered a forty-five minute lecture on Buddhism; of frail Pat, with his perennially mussed hair and sleepy eyes, who somehow always made you feel that you had just saved his life; and of the two Scotts. One was an athletic, fashionably long-haired landscape architect with a great comic knack. At quorum socials, leaning against one of the Institute building closets, he would break us all up by improvising phony "Quincy" scripts in a mock-Jack Klugman voice. The other Scott was a cocky libertarian in a dull green sport coat, who liked to talk about revolution, pulling guns on police, and bankrupting the Church. People tended to avoid the second Scott.

The cast was great, but not everyone liked the repertory: the way I ran things seemed to rankle some people. Unlike Paul, I had no knack for being all things to all people, though I tried like crazy. My spiritual clientele, however, did not really include the more orthodox (their view) or the less creative and tolerant (my view). I realized that some brethren were not getting what they bargained for in this quorum. And that made me feel guilty. I knew I could not adapt beyond a certain point; meanwhile, the old guard of the quorum was leaving and more reactionary families moving in. Add my guilt to long-standing bouts with depression and the bishop and you will understand why, after a year and a half, I asked the stake president to be released. He complied and I said goodbye to Utopia and Parnassus. I became the ward librarian and the old librarian became the new president.

In a couple of months, after our first quorum president (the Latin American literature major) got a teaching job in another state, I was called to fill the vacancy left in the high council—but that's another story in itself. Meanwhile, the new elders quorum president, as I expected, changed everything.

In time the boundaries were redrawn and the university ward gave up the ghost. Everyone was released, scattered. The bishop I loved and fought with died suddenly. Some of the rest of us send Christmas cards to each other. Who knows where everyone else ended up. Maybe some of them will read this and smile.

Now, as I send my fragmentary memories of the quorum on their slow journey back to the mouth of the well, I can't decide if I was a hero, a miserable failure, or, as is often the case, both. I only know I miss the old quorum. I still think of it all the time, remembering those days when it stood whole and complete, like a great, gleaming china set locked up in its cabinet in the Midwest. ☐



## A NIGHT IN SNOW CANYON

This is the place of inverted  
Valleys, where black magma  
And red sandstone meet.

Lie in the dry river bed.  
Wait for sleep. Listen  
To footsteps of motionless pilgrims.

Here is your parent, and your child—  
Murmuring of things that were;  
Speechless with things that will be.

Bats with familiar faces fly  
Through the night, guided  
Only by echoes of themselves.

Wind moves over your body  
Like the airy fingers of a lost lover:  
A warm pressure, here—then not here.

Stars spin in their space-worn orbits  
Forever defining north, as if eternity  
Had anything to do with time.

—LAURA HAMBLIN

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