

IN MEMORIAM

LOWELL MARSDEN DURHAM

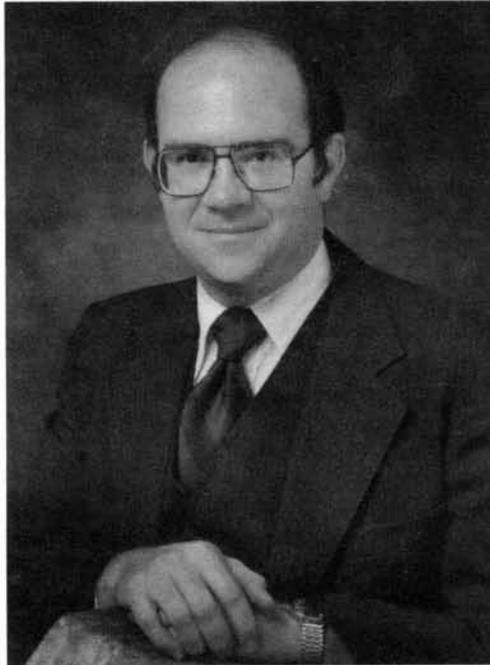
By Martha Sonntag Bradley

WHEN SOMEONE we respect and care about dies, we are stunned by questions about the meaning of our existence. Suddenly our philosophical musings seem pompous and insipid. Even our answers based on faith and belief fail to satisfy or mute our profound sense of loss. The value of a life well lived is immeasurable. Lowell Marsden Durham was a friend I would have gone to with such questions. He and his wife, Linda, began enjoying grandchildren not long before their long struggle with his cancer. They valued every moment spent with them.

Lowell was a good man. He lived a life of poetry and family, of church and business. He mentored many about how to enter the world of writing, about the power of well-chosen words and ideas, about being a member of a community, caring about each other. Lowell valued, more than titles or wealth, an authentic life with a certain quality of intellectual and spiritual energy. And he made incredible shifts to live that kind of life.

His impressive and varied career included a Ph.D. in English literature from the University of Washington, many years as associate editor of the *New Era*, president of Deseret Book Company, president of ZCMI, and, last, director of the Obert C. and Grace A. Tanner Humanities Center at the University of Utah and founder and co-owner of Technographics, a book bindery.

Lowell was a man of paradoxes: he was nationally recognized as a squash champion and a businessman; an award-winning poet and grandfather; a Mormon leader and humanist. He was as comfortable in an academic setting as in a corporate board room. He had an uncanny ability to see straight to the core of a person. He recognized and in fact celebrated diversity—caring about people who were most different from him, counting among his best friends Apostle Marvin Ashton, Church educator Lowell Bennion,



and Episcopal Bishop Carolyn Tanner Irish. He fished or played squash or tennis with Spence Eccles and other Salt Lake business leaders. Yet he gave the same care and attention to his friendships with students, neighbors, and employees. We all felt we were his special friends, that he understood who we are and why we are of value.

A bridge builder, Lowell was described by one colleague at the University of Utah as “uniquely situated to move between the Mormon world and the academic world.” One friend, Grethe Peterson, acknowledged his remarkable skill at negotiating the shifting planes between “town and gown,” moving easily in both worlds.

Lowell was far too young to die, and those of us who knew him well and cared about him feel robbed—he had stories and poems yet to write, children and grandchildren to raise. He had often promised to join with Leonard Arrington to tell the story behind the commissioning and de-commissioning of

the Church’s sesquicentennial history project, which he worked on while running Deseret Book.

I have thought at funerals—far too numerous this past year because so many of my heroes have died—that regardless of how well funeral addresses comment on an individual’s life, they fall very short. The best things about Lowell Durham aren’t listed on his résumé; they are the matters of his heart: his consistency and steadiness, his clear intellect and questioning mind, his dry humor and wit.

Many times when he spoke, whether before board meetings or church groups, he had a volume of Emily Dickinson in front of him or of Robert Frost or John Harris. And he loved to tell a William James story that explained best, for him, the unexplainable: A woman came to a famous philosopher asking for a sensible explanation of the origin of the earth. The teacher patiently told her that the world came forth on the back of a turtle. She impatiently asked him for more, for what came before that. “Well,” he said, “it was on the back of a turtle. In fact, it was turtles all the way.” (Lowell’s point is that while there is no way to explain the mysteries of life, it is good to contemplate them.) In a recent Tanner Humanities Center publication, Lowell is quoted as saying that a humanities education helps students to “ask important questions about life, encouraging them to seek answers that are thoughtful, that avoid the insular, and that take into consideration differing cultures and worldviews.” This was his approach to all of life—believing that the learning was in the doing: “In the beginning and throughout the continuing process of doing humanities our strength is indeed, the deed—in the doing. It is the exciting things that we do that can make a difference.”

There is no way to understand or accept this loss but to remember the lessons he taught us through his life well lived. ☐