

A BED WITH A VIEW

THE WORLD HAS NEED OF
WILLING . . . TIRED PEOPLE

By Dian Saderup Monson



Dian Monson's seven-year-old daughter calls this original drawing, "My Mom."

I AM A TIRED PERSON. There are many of us around these days: the chronically fatigued, the depressed, the ill. Some of us may be malingerers, disguised as tired people; many of us fear we are malingerers who for unknown reasons cannot shake our tiredness and go *do* something—say, build up the Kingdom or consistently make it to Cub Scout pack planning meeting. Other people do these things. Why can't we?

Tired. We're tired, all the time, pretty much, with occasional interruptions, hours or days here and there when we're on top of the world and so decide to hack away for twenty minutes at those weeds in the garden plot out back. President Kimball's 1970s admonition to paint our barns and outbuildings and plant vegetable gardens hovers at



DIAN SADERUP MONSON is a homemaker, sometime-teacher, and writer. She lives with her family in Orem, Utah.

the perimeters of our consciousness. Surely, there is, in these relatively energetic shining moments, something we could *improve* by our efforts.

To be a Mormon and a tired person hardly makes for a seamless sense of identity. We Latter-day Saints are movers. We are definitely doers of the Word and not hearers only. In my ward, here in the heartland of Orem, the most active Saints among us could probably be called hyperactive. The extra mile? We take that for granted. If a Sunday School lesson calls for dates, forget the chalkboard. We get individually printed, fold-out time lines, complete with computer generated illustrations of particularly significant events! You can imagine how a tired person feels among such workhorses.

I often find myself wondering if there are tired people hidden all over my ward but they're just better disciplined than I am. Yet it's hard to imagine that many of these movers and shakers have a secret life in bed,

asleep. It's difficult to believe that make-up can actually give a woman's face that special vital gleam—the irrepressible “joy in the gospel” look—which radiates from the faces of the apparently not-overwhelmingly-tired during Primary music practice when all you have to do is keep fifty kids under the age of eight focused on forty-five minutes of sermons disguised as songs. The truly tired know: there is tired, and then there is *tired*. Ordinary tired goes away after a good seven and a half hours of sleep. Ordinary tired knows that tomorrow really is another day, a chance to do things quite differently if one so chooses. Ordinary tired sometimes has a hard week or a difficult month: *We're all just so busy these days. I never seem to stop running.*

Truly tired, on the other hand, realizes that seven hours or seventy—she'll still be tired, maybe just slightly less so. Truly tired is not so busy. Truly tired doesn't run anywhere at all, if such running can possibly be avoided. Truly tired avoids busy-producing commitments such as, “Yes, kids, we can go to the grocery store this afternoon for ice cream,” knowing that such wild promises come back, quite quickly, to haunt: *But you promised. Liar! Liar!* And truly tired is often too tired to reprove said kids for such slanderous back talk. Truly tired naps religiously, has innumerable lie downs each day, gives her eyelids frequent breaks. No matter where truly tired is, bed will never be far from mind. During these apparently stuporous periods, however, truly tired may actually be engaged in various worthy causes, such as gearing up to lay out cereal bowls and spoons for supper.

DON'T mistake me. I poke only the gentlest fun at truly tired people. I am, after all, one of them. I have had to find my own ways of coping with this embarrassing predicament: I hardly ever want to get out of bed, and there are times—fortunately none too recently—when I just flat out *can't* do it. I could digress into a lengthy and convoluted discussion of my health, but . . . let's just not, if you don't mind. My health hardly seems the issue anymore; the only relevant feature of my physical condition is that I have been, for years now, and remain—a tired person. (This designation reminds me ever-so-uncomfortably of David Foster Wallace's short story, “The Depressed Person,” which depicts its title character as monstrously self-involved. The story is, alas, monstrously hilarious.)

And so, I've had to look for meaning—What could Heavenly Father possibly have in mind? What on earth am I supposed to

do?—right here in my queen-sized, quite comfortable bed. All around me I sense people rushing about on the Lord's errands. I do undertake errands myself, although with trepidation. I have a great fear of being stranded by exhaustion at Super Target while purchasing wedding or baby shower gifts, or in the middle of reorganizing my disastrous kitchen shelves, or on a day trip to Salt Lake to visit my elderly mother. It's not that I'm an invalid, just a very hesitant Doer. I get things done. At least some things. I'm slow, a sort of tortoise amidst hares who never stop to rest up and eat lunch.

My ward boasts, at last count, over twenty full-time missionaries. My neighbors all appear to be teaching their children the Value of Work. Ten-year-olds mow lawns; preschoolers pull weeds; toddlers remove pebbles from garden beds. During summer, on Saturday mornings, I lie in bed listening to the distant humming and nearby roar of lawn mowers. There have been times when my own yard has been so weedy and untended I've felt a need to slip from the house—on those occasions when I actually left the house—in dark glasses and a trench coat.

Today! Today! Work with a will. Today! Today! Your duty fulfill. . . . We Latter-day Saints are not big on tomorrow, let alone the day after that. Whether we be thrusting in our sickles with our might; preparing every needful thing, for he who is prepared shall not fear; oiling our literal and figurative lamps—let's get it done. Just Do It. (President Kimball did live long enough, I think, to reformulate that quote with the youth in mind: Don't do it!) Generally, though, Do It (just not *it*) remains our motto. We like to be able to measure our successes. We enjoy objective evidence of our worthiness: 100% visiting teaching. 67% home teaching. We really like to keep score, and the competition is—ourselves. Even, I'm genuinely pained to say, the temple recommends we carry may serve for some of us mainly as a measure of performance. Another visible indicator of achievement.

Work is what we Mormons tend to do best. And it shows. It's how we've gotten where we are today. I remember once landing a live-in position in Boston's wealthiest suburb when I arrived, nearly penniless, for graduate school. The teenaged daughter

whom I was to occasionally chaperone and cook dinner for, as well as teach to drive, later told me I'd gotten the job because I was a Mormon. Nearly everybody on the east coast is familiar with the Mormon nanny phenomenon. People like to hire Mormons to care for their children, not to mention take care of their company books and pretty

LATER

on in the lesson, I found an opportunity to admit that lying in bed reading magazines and books was practically all I ever did and it hadn't occurred to me, at least not in some while, to consider those activities . . . a cause for repentance.

much any other job you can think of requiring honesty and hard work, because, well, on average we're honest and hardworking. *We do our jobs.* My sister, who no longer claims any affiliation with Mormonism, nevertheless called and asked me to enlist the aid of her best friend's bishop last year when that friend, also entirely inactive, was in personal crisis. As I said at the time to my class of BYU freshman writing students (I enjoy a rather leisurely teaching schedule, about one course per eighteen months): "Who better to call than a Mormon if you've got a catastrophe going on? It's what we do best." If my own house were flooded, burned, or destroyed by earthquake I can't think of anybody I'd rather have on hand than a squadron of Mormons.

So we do have a reputation, certainly not unjustified, for hardworking dependability. We're not boomers—we certainly weren't during the great westward migration of the 1800s; we believe in the slow, steady production of abundance through effort and prudence. As Wallace Stegner noted in his numerous commentaries on the development of the American West, the Mormons constituted an exception to the rule: we came not to make a killing and move on, but to

settle in and providently expand. We've been doing so ever since. We're the epitome of the American Dream made good on its promise. And now our expansion has truly assumed worldwide proportions. People who watch these sorts of things have noticed. The Mormons are not only coming. We're here. Rich. Powerful. Dedicated. And persevering.

We're like a steadily building wave constituted of faithful workers. Doers. We're the stone cut out of the mountain without hands, destined to fill the whole earth, one determined step at a time, or rather, as the case now stands, millions of determined steps at a time.

SO where does that leave a tired person such as myself? It became clear to me some time ago that surely the Kingdom must have a place for all kinds. Even tired kinds. While a capacity for rigorous self-discipline and hard work may characterize the Latter-day Saints as a people, that very capacity can, I think, sometimes undermine aspects of our individual spirituality. I've been surprised by how many women in my current ward tell me privately how grateful they are to me for speaking up in Relief Society

about my difficulties in, er, actually doing stuff. Are they tired, too? Or do they long, amidst a relentlessly-moving sea of activity, to find themselves afloat, if only for a moment, within a comfortable and comforting doldrum? I remember one sister confessing at the beginning of her lesson on work that one day recently she'd been tempted to forego her daily chores and actually sit in an easy chair and read a magazine! Later on in the lesson, I found an opportunity to admit that lying in bed reading magazines and books was practically all I ever did and it hadn't occurred to me, at least not in some while, to consider those activities a matter of giving in to temptation, a cause for repentance.

Perhaps I'm wrong about that, but I choose not to think so, and I haven't felt particularly impressed that the Lord thinks so either. If it takes all kinds, then my kind is the sort whose chief labor could be said to be mental or even, during rare periods of particular elevation, spiritual. Lying in bed affords one lots of time to think and read, to read and think, and sometimes to write one's thoughts down. In Mormonism, we don't have a contemplative tradition. We have no monasteries or nunneries where men and

women take vows of perpetual silence and retreat into lives of prayer and contemplation. For one thing, we simply haven't had time for a contemplative tradition. You don't launch a new religious tradition in the face of massive persecution, establish a lasting kingdom in a desert and expand worldwide in little over 150 years and have much time or energy left over for sitting still and thinking.

I remember studying New Testament Greek with an elderly Episcopal monk in Cambridge years ago (tiredness hadn't yet completely overtaken my life); at the monastery, I was interested in the stark, usually empty rooms—a bed, a desk and chair, a wardrobe, hardwood floor—that I had to pass to get to our meeting place in the library. When I finally asked Fr. Dalby what those rooms were used for—sometimes a door would be closed or a suitcase resting discretely next to a bed—he answered, “Oh, for people on retreat.” Then he had to explain the idea of a retreat to me. It was utterly foreign, and I was, frankly, incredulous: These people come here for a week and don't do anything but pray or talk to anybody except their spiritual counselor the whole time? Fr. Dalby couldn't understand my consternation. Hadn't the Mormons retreats? It was a lovely way to refresh the soul, he explained.

Well, to say the least, I think I've come to understand a bit better the retreat mentality, having found myself on a modified one that's lasted years and still counting. I believe the idea of the retreat is to achieve, if possible, a state of contemplation and in that state communion with the Divine. Suffice it to say, I rarely get very close to real contemplation, but I do manage to think quite a bit. Very occasionally my thoughts seem actually inspired. As a Latter-day Saint, I've been conditioned to expect revelation through activity: nothing brings the Spirit in quite the way as a good deed accomplished. But we also endorse the still small voice that speaks to our hearts and our minds in the solitude of prayer. Our children are encouraged in song to search, ponder, and pray. If we have trouble as adults finding the time to do these things, nearly every *Ensign* seems to contain the story of a harried young mother who obtains spiritual succor by rising thirty minutes before the rest of her family each day for a private devotional. It's not that Mormons decline contemplation; we just like to see it in its place—another activity among the many

that a fruitful day might contain.

Moderation in all things. For the Latter-day Saint, that certainly applies to contemplation, or rather the impulse toward contemplation. As I've indicated, I don't think true contemplation an easy thing to attain or find. I suspect some people are gifted with the capacity for it; most of us muddle

I T'S not that Mormons decline contemplation; we just like to see it in its place—another activity among the many that a fruitful day might contain.

along. Catholic writer Andre Dubus felt that this inability on the part of good-willed people to achieve contemplation explained “the necessity and wonder of ritual. For ritual allows those who cannot will themselves out of the secular to perform the spiritual, as dancing allows the tongue-tied man a ceremony of love.” Perhaps that is why, when burdened by cares requiring focused thought and attention to quiet spiritual promptings, Mormons retreat to the temple when possible. The ritual acts in a sacred setting do seem to lift the LDS seeker into a higher, altered realm, a realm characterized by a certain spiritual alertness coupled with peace.

Contemplation as a habit of being (to borrow Sally Fitzgerald's phrase describing Flannery O'Connor's “excellence not only of action but of interior disposition”) may not be something we Latter-day Saints can expect to encounter a lot of among ourselves, but then I suspect it is rare among any religious people. The difference for us is that members of other faiths can find ways to legitimately devote themselves to contemplation as an occupation, if necessary, whereas we Mormons may appreciate the fruits of the contemplative souls in our midst, but nevertheless haven't room at this historical moment for allowing such souls to flourish on anything but their own time, if, given the demands of the faith, such time can indeed be found. We would like to be a thoughtful people, a re-

flective people, a people full of spiritual understanding. But we are also, simply, unavoidably, very very busy. At least many of us are.

It seems possible that intractable tiredness may not be all bad, in individuals scattered here and there among us. There may be actual advantages—not just personal advantages, but communal as well—to taking to one's bed. Perhaps, given the proper mindset, we tired people have a duty to fill. A job. A worthy task—unfortunately, though, a task that often bears little visible, quantifiable fruit. That's just how it is, though. Let us remember that Jesus cared little for the getting of credit. The near invisibility of a tired person's possible virtues—well, that's nothing a bit of humility can't render tolerable.

AS SUNSTONE'S readers and contributors undoubtedly know, we are viewed with a certain suspicion by some of the Brethren and many mainstream Church members, the hardworking, dutiful, *Ensign*-reading populace whom we all want at our sides during an earthquake. Our problem is that we are prone to thinking, and not just thinking, but to exploring nooks and crannies in our history, theology, and tradition that perhaps, some say, are better left untouched. Those some have a point. From my observation, it's fairly easy to think one's way out of the Church, and has been since the earliest days of Christianity. Look around: surely you have friends, or perhaps even yourself, who have done that. Joseph Smith has been called everything from a charlatan to a spiritual genius by those who've thought about him and reject him as an actual prophet with a specific mission. The Apostle Paul noted that to the Greeks, those notorious seekers of wisdom, the idea of Christ crucified constituted pure folly, even silliness.

So dangers exist even for those of us tucked safely abed. The Lord says he will destroy the wisdom of the wise and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent. God save me from too much of the wrong kind of wisdom; from too much poorly-tempered understanding. And with that prayer in my heart, I'll carry on, carry on, carry on. Resting. And as I rest, reading. Thinking. Occasionally writing. ☺



To comment on this article, or to read comments by others, visit our website: Sunstoneonline.com.