

DEVOTIONAL

MORNING REFLECTIONS WHILE
STANDING ON ONE FOOT

By Frances Lee Menlove

"The way we spend our days is, of course, the way we spend our lives." —ANNIE DILLARD

I BEGIN WITH a story.¹ This story takes place in a small Midwestern town early in the last century. It is the story of Mr. Simpson, a man who was exacting in all things. He was an accountant, the only accountant in the small town. Each day he would arrive at his office on the second floor of a building along the main street at exactly 8:30. He would walk in, hang his hat and coat on the rack, nod to his secretary, Mrs. Donovan, and sit down at his rolltop desk. He would then take the desk key from his pocket, unlock the third drawer from the top, and pull it out. For a long time, maybe a full sixty seconds, he would look into the drawer, then close it and relock it. Then it was his custom to turn and say, "Good morning, Mrs. Donovan."

For more than a decade, this routine never varied. In all these years, he never said a word about what he looked at in that drawer first thing every morning. Then Mr. Simpson died a couple of years before his planned retirement, and Mrs. Donovan was left to clear out the office, including the desk. I imagine she felt some trepidation as she turned the key of the third drawer and pulled it open. She later reported what she saw. It was a large card. On this card in bold, block letters were the words:

DEBITS ON THE LEFT,
CREDITS ON THE RIGHT.

I start with this story to remind us that we need to stay in touch, in daily touch, with what is most essential. Our accountant chose "debits on the left, credits on the right" as his basic instruction, his grounding. What is most basic to us as we go about our daily lives? What might we put on a card and contemplate for a minute a day?

In this essay, I nominate four candidates for you to consider and ponder. Not so much so that you will adopt them, but to nudge you into seeking out your own most basic instruction to put in your real or imaginary drawer.

THE FIRST CANDIDATE is the punch line from a story told about Rabbi Hillel, an influential Jewish teacher around the time of Jesus. You've all heard the famous saying attributed to Rabbi Hillel: "If I am not for myself, then who will be for me? And if I am only for myself, then what am I? And if not now, when?"

But it is another story about this renowned rabbi we are going to look at today. Our story begins with a man knocking on the door of Rabbi Shammai, another well-known rabbi who lived near Hillel. Now while Hillel was known for his kindness, his gentleness, and his concern for humanity, Rabbi Shammai was made of sterner stuff.

When Rabbi Shammai opened his door, the man standing there said, "I would like to convert to Judaism and become a Jew, but I don't have much time. I know I have to learn the entire book you call the Torah, but you must teach it to me while I stand on one foot." Now Rabbi Shammai knew full well that it takes years of study to learn the Torah, and here in front of him was this crazy man wanting to learn it while standing on one foot. Rabbi Shammai slammed his door shut.

The man hurried away. Later he found Rabbi Hillel. "I would like to convert to Judaism and become a Jew," said the man. "But I don't have much time. I know I have to learn the entire book you call the Torah, but you must teach it to me while I stand on one foot." Rabbi Hillel looked at him for a moment and then said, "Certainly. Now stand on one foot."

The man balanced on one foot.

"Repeat after me," said Rabbi Hillel. "What is hateful to you, do not do to someone else. That is the whole Torah. Everything else is commentary."

The man repeated after Rabbi Hillel, "What is hateful to me, do not do to someone else. That is the whole Torah. Everything else is commentary." Then Rabbi Hillel added, as the man put his foot back on the ground, "Now, go and learn it so it is a part of you."

This is our first candidate for reflection: *What is hateful to you, do not do to someone else. That is the whole Torah. Everything else is commentary.*

THE SECOND NOMINATION comes from the Book of Micah. In conveying their messages of God's warnings and desires, the prophets Amos and Micah both employ the language of law—court, case, controversy, contend, plea—all legal terms. Amos quotes God, who is both judge and prosecutor and is really ticked off. "I hate, I despise your festivals," says God, "and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies" or, he adds, in your burnt offerings, or the noise of your songs, or the melody of your harps. "But"—and here comes God's bottom line, his non-negotiable demand—"But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:21–24, NRSV). The point seems to be that religious observance without social justice is meaningless.

Micah follows the same technique. We are plunked into a trial with God as judge and prosecutor. The prosecutor describes what Judah is guilty of and then proves it. Judah does not have much to say by way of defense, so the judge pronounces sentence. The people have hands full of sacrifices but hearts empty of goodness and justice.

Micah imagines you or me puzzling about what God wants:

With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression and the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? (Micah 6:6–7, NRSV)

Is this what God wants? No! Micah says we often make much of that which does not matter much to God. So what is essential? What should we ponder each day? The answer: "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to



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walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8).

This is the second candidate for our morning reflection: *Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.*

CANDIDATE NUMBER THREE also begins with a story. This is a true story. It never happened, but it is true. A horrendous storm caused massive flooding for miles around a certain town. The flooding continued for almost a week.

On the second day of flooding, the National Guard evacuated the entire town, but one old man refused to go. "This is my home," he said, "and I am staying. I have put my faith in God to protect me and keep me from harm."

On the third day, the flood was about six feet deep, and the old man took refuge on the roof of his house. A woman in a rowboat came by to try to rescue the man. He refused to go. "I believe that God will protect me. I have faith."

On the fourth day, the flood began to creep onto the roof. An officer on a Coast Guard boat came by and tried to convince the old man to come away. "I'm not leaving," he stated. "This is my home. God will protect me."

On the fifth day, the old man was standing on the very top of the roof, and the water was up to his knees. A helicopter came to rescue him with a rope ladder, but he would not be rescued. "Leave me be. My God will protect me."

On the sixth day, the old man drowned. In heaven, the old man waited in line until it was his turn to talk to God. He stepped up in front of the Almighty and said, "Where were you during the flood? I had faith in you! I kept saying that you would provide, and you didn't, and I drowned. Why did you let me down?"

God shrugged and replied, "Who do you think sent you those two boats and the helicopter?"

What this old man missed, what we all can miss, is that our job description requires that we collaborate with God. St. Augustine of Hippo puts it this way, "God without us will not, and we without God cannot."

St. Augustine's famous aphorism speaks directly to this collaboration. It is a saying that inspired Bishop Desmond Tutu, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize. He quoted it often as he led the struggle against apartheid in South Africa.

This is our third candidate for contemplation. *God without us will not, and we without God cannot.*

NOW FOR THE final candidate. If an accountant keeps "debits on the left, credits on the right" in a drawer for contemplation each day, what might a saint write on a card? Fortunately we have a saint we can turn to for some guidance. Not just your everyday, garden-variety saint, but a Latter-day Saint. "Every church needs a saint," says Sterling McMurrin. "Lowell Bennion is Mormonism's saint."²

Lowell Bennion's qualifications for sainthood are legion. He devoted himself to living the Christian life, to teaching, writing about practical religion, and serving the aged, needy, and troubled. He has been called "the conscience of the Church," but really, he was the conscience of the community. For an encyclopedia entry on Lowell, Eugene England wrote:

He is the author of dozens of books and hundreds of essays and lectures that have helped give rational consistency to Mormon thought, have focused it in social morality and service, and have opened it to ecumenical dialogue with other faiths as well as the state and national communities. He has been a courageous, outspoken, and effective foe of religious prejudice and of racism, sexism, and materialism.

He has also demonstrated his teachings and inspired thousands of others to follow them through devoted and effective practical humanitarian efforts in his own community and beyond.³

In 1935, Lowell founded the Lambda Delta Sigma fraternity to help college students integrate learning with service. Thereafter, nearly every Saturday for thirty years, he would accompany a Lambda Delta Sigma chapter or two as they cleaned a yard, painted a house, or delivered food donated by others or from his own garden to those in need. He followed the dictum of St. Francis of Assisi: "Preach the gospel at all times. If necessary, use words."

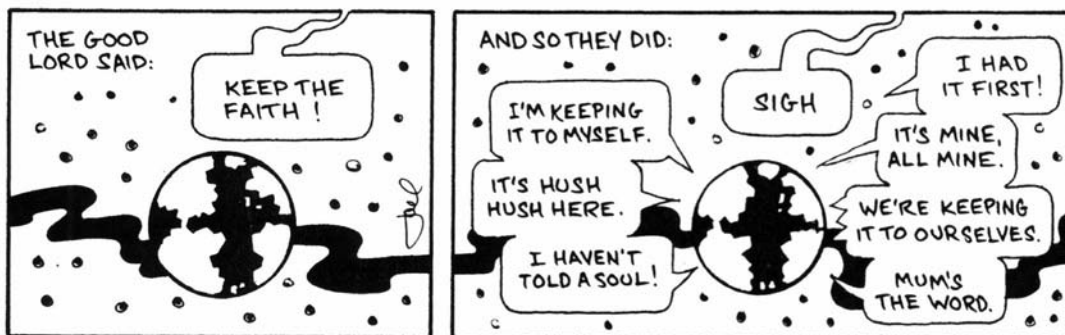
A food bank Lowell started in 1977 consisted of Lowell and some friends and a pickup. By 1990, it had distributed \$3.5 million in food all over Utah. This saint's version of Christian charity, which includes anyone in need, helped nudge the Church along toward moving away from the old motto, "We take care of our own," to adopt a more expansive view of Christian charity, reaching out to all in need. Starting in 1991, LDS fast offerings could be designated for humanitarian aid.

Lowell's life was not always smooth sailing. He was forced out of his job as director of the LDS Institute of Religion at the University of Utah, and his son was excommunicated from the Church for being a homosexual.

Sometimes checked, but never defeated, Lowell Bennion stands steadfast for the finest principles of human decency. When a full history of Mormonism in the latter half of the twentieth century is written, it may well be that the voice of "Brother B" will be heard above the rest.⁴

What might this Latter-day Saint have looked to for inspiration each day? What might Lowell Bennion have believed was bedrock basic to the way he lived his days? Fortunately we have Mary Bradford's superb biography of Lowell Bennion to give the answer to our question: Lowell used a verse from the Bhagavad-Gita as a personal motto: "To action alone thou hast a right, not to its fruits."⁵ "To action alone thou hast a right, not to its fruits." This is a dense saying, rich with meanings. Listen to what

Pontius' Puddle



Lowell himself says about it:

In the Bhagavad-Gita (Song Celestial), the devotional classic of Hinduism, I read, “To action alone thou hast a right, not to its fruits.”

... I have learned that we have but limited control over the fruits of our actions, and individuals respond to our words, intentions and deeds with their own frame of reference, not from ours. I can control only my actions. How others respond to my ways is their business. Thus I am learning to feel, think and act as I believe I should and to get my satisfaction out of my own doings. Why should I place myself at the mercy of others?⁶

So, take action, do your best, and let go of the outcomes. Don't get all snarled up in “what ifs”—“what if” it is received this way or that way, or “what if” they think this or that, or “what if” I am misunderstood, etc. Just use your best judgment, do what you can, and then let go. Let go of outcomes. As Mary Bradford says, Lowell “filled each day with his best efforts and turned to the next with no regrets.”⁷ See what you can do, do it, and shut out the rest. In a personal note to me, Mary Bradford summed up Lowell's approach to life:

Don't be afraid to be yourself. . . .
Listen to others, read widely, and heed counsel, but do your own thinking, draw conclusions, speak your own words, determine your own actions.

Lowell Bennion also made clear that the fruits of action should not be your motive. Rewards in this world or the next are not to be the motivations for doing good.

Gandhi was also deeply influenced by this divine Hindu maxim, and it shaped his non-violent campaign for freedom. Gandhi writes:

There should be no selfish purpose behind our actions. And to be detached from the fruits of actions is not to be ignorant of them or disown them. To be detached is never to abandon action, because the contemplated result may not follow.⁸

Lowell Bennion applied this Hindu verse to his writing as well—and remember, he was the author of dozens of books and hundreds of essays and lectures. Do your best, sign your name to it, and move on. Let go. Mary Bradford recalls a time when Lowell gave the commencement address at the University of Utah. A relative asked him for a

copy, and he handed over his only copy. (Luckily the talk had been recorded.) This incident exemplifies his discipline of doing the job, signing his name to it, and letting it go.⁹

This is the fourth candidate for our morning reflection: *To action alone thou hast a right, not to its fruits.*

DEBITS ON THE left, credits on the right. What is it that you might put in your drawer or in your wallet or purse to remind you of your own grounding? What is most basic to you?

In closing, here again are the four candidates. Read them slowly and pause between each to allow yourself a few seconds for private reflection. These are presented, not so much that you will adopt them, but to nudge you into seeking your own most basic instruction.

What is hateful to you, do not do to someone else. That is the whole Torah. Everything else is commentary.

—RABBI HILLEL

What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

—MICAH 6:6–8

God without us will not, and we without God cannot.

—ST. AUGUSTINE

To action alone thou hast a right, not to its fruits. (Do what you can and let go of outcomes.)

—LOWELL BENNION's motto from the Bhagavad-Gita

In keeping with the theme of short and pithy, I close with a one-line prayer. I give it twice.

*God give me work till my life shall end,
and life till my work is done.*

*God give me work till my life shall end,
and life till my work is done.*¹⁰

Amen.



NOTES

1. I am indebted to Charles Busch for this story.
2. Mary Lythgoe Bradford, *Lowell L. Bennion: Teacher, Counselor, Humanitarian* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995), from the back dust jacket.
3. Eugene England, *Utah History Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Lowell L. Bennion,” available at www.media.utah.edu (accessed 7 April 2007).
4. Bradford, *Lowell L. Bennion*, xii.

5. *Ibid.*, viii, x.
6. Lowell L. Bennion, *I Believe* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book 1983), 37.
7. Bradford, *Lowell L. Bennion*, x.
8. Quoted in *Young India*, 15 March 1928.
9. Mary Lythgoe Bradford, private communication with the author.
10. Prayer inscribed on the gravestone of novelist Winifred Holtby, 1898–1935.



HORSE EYE

Sun will settle. In gold.
And ever after
azure.

Higher light yet lurks,
lifts a diaphanous skirt,
uncrosses its legs a bit, nervous.

Aspens, toothpick skinny,
stripped
as if

pulled between two fingers
and left with nothing
but teeth chattering bareness.

What color meadow.
Ripened bear fur to fall into,
if he'd let you.

At its core, marsh.
Blinked reeds scribe its murk
unmarred by wind

nor what left
it sees of alder,
of whitened cliff,

of bruised wisps,
of withering
blue.

—THOMAS ROBERT BARNES