

What Have You to Declare?

ARDETH G. KAPP

I recall vividly my first experience on this campus as a student many years ago. More recently, I was a faculty member in the College of Education, then served for a time in the area of Student Life. Today I return not as a student or as a faculty member, but rather as one anxious to open my heart and be allowed the sacred privilege of touching yours. I want to communicate soul to soul about a few things I have learned since those early years at BYU—things that *really* matter (and I have come to know there aren't a lot).

Heading Toward the Border Crossing

Come with me then, if you will, back to that last day of finals. The semester had ended (it was a quarter in those days) and I, with others, piled into a friend's old car. There were always more people than comfort would allow, but what we lost in comfort we saved in cost. With tuna sandwiches or whatever was left in the cupboard, we headed north. We were going home—to Canada.

At the border crossing, before the eyes of the customs officials, we were required to open our suitcases. And there was the grey-white laundry that you hoped your mom could remedy because of your weekly decisions to mix whites and coloreds and have a full batch.

(That way you could save a quarter.) The customs officer stirred around as he routinely asked, "What have you to declare?" There was never much to declare—just our name, our destination, and our present place of residence. It is this brief moment at the border crossing, responding to the customs official's inquiry, "What have you to declare?" about which I wish to share some ponderings with you—ponderings and insights I have gathered over the years.

Wise travelers usually make a list of the valuables they are carrying to facilitate the passage through customs and expedite their arrival home. I refer now, of course, not to a trip to Canada or Mexico, not even to Germany or Italy, but rather to our ultimate journey, yours and mine—our journey to our eternal home, and the border crossing—and how we will each respond to the question "What have you to declare?"

As I anticipate that great moment, I believe the list we will each be required to present will not be written with ink but, as Paul described,

Ardeth G. Kapp was general president of the Young Women of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this devotional address was given at Brigham Young University on 29 January 1985.

“with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart” (2 Corinthians 3:3). I believe it will be the evidence of our love for each other that will qualify us for passage. And the customs official, who will that be? Nephi tells us what we might expect there.

Behold, the way for man is narrow, but it lieth in a straight course before him, and the keeper of the gate is the Holy One of Israel; and he employeth no servant there; and there is none other way save it be by the gate; for he cannot be deceived, for the Lord God is his name. [2 Nephi 9:41]

As I, in my times of quiet meditation, consider the ecstasy and joy of any experience we have had in this life, I believe it will be paled by what we will experience in that moment when we give an accounting to the Holy One of Israel, a silent declaration of accountability that will speak loudly of how we exercised our agency, of the choices we made, and, finally, of the values and principles we claimed as our very own to protect us and direct us over the treacherous narrow passages on our journey.

Returning Home Safely

I know something about the risk of traveling over icy, wintry roads when travel warnings are posted and the danger of blizzards and cold temperatures threaten our safety and sometimes delay our progress while loved ones—Mom and Dad, brothers and sisters, special friends—take turns standing watch at the kitchen window at least one hour before our expected arrival. I knew in those days that family prayers had been fervently offered in our behalf that we might return home safely. Can you, in the quiet of your thoughts, sense that moment of greeting, even if you haven’t had such an experience?

Contrast to that the tragedy if the highway patrol had to report to anxious loved ones that the mountain pass and highway were steep

and slick, that you must not have read the warning signs, or that you were sleepy and not alert enough to respond to the dangers, that you had missed a turn—and no one survived. Think of those loved ones at the window.

With these two contrasted homecomings before us, I want to share with you what I believe the joy will be as we approach our heavenly home. But first let us consider what road signs we are following to secure such a homecoming and, specifically, our safe travel.

Would you knock on the door of your own soul and inquire within concerning the markers, road signs, or values that you declare publicly and privately—the ones *you* have determined to follow? If we only use external markers (like other people’s values or rules and regulations or policies—yes, even BYU standards), if we use only external signals and signs to determine our course, what will happen on a stormy night when the clouds and fog obscure the signals and we are alone in the dark? It isn’t a committee or an institution or a crew that determines our course.

A writer tells about attending a dance in a country where there had been a revolution. The lights were turned out during the playing of the national anthem. As one leader explained, “This is a social affair, and we don’t want to see who won’t stand up.” We must have our *own* clearly defined values burning brightly within; only then do we have an inner court to which we can appeal for judgment of our performance—judgment of *our* performance, not someone else’s.

Orson Whitney, writing about a definition for sin, has helped me understand the need for guidance from our own inner lighthouse. He says,

Sin is the transgression of divine law, as made known through the conscience or by revelation. A man sins when he violates his conscience, going contrary to light and knowledge—not the light and knowledge that has come to his neighbor, but that

which has come to himself. He sins when he does the opposite of what he knows to be right. [Orson Whitney, quoted by Bruce R. McConkie, Mormon Doctrine (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), p. 735]

Making Good Choices

I find myself reaching and stretching when I learn of others who navigate so very well in troubled waters. Even more heroic is the conduct of those who make choices in waters which appear to be calm and of little concern to others. Let me explain what I mean with this account told by a young journalist in his own words.

I was . . . driving to a scene I didn't want to see. A man . . . had accidentally backed his pickup truck over his baby granddaughter in the driveway of the family home. It was a fatality.

As I parked. . . I saw a stocky, white-haired man in cotton work clothes standing near a pickup. Cameras were trained on him, and reporters were sticking microphones in his face. Looking totally bewildered, he was trying to answer their questions. Mostly he was only moving his lips, blinking and choking up.

. . . I can still see in my mind's eye that devastated old man looking down at the place in the driveway where the child had been. Beside the house was a freshly spaded flower bed, and nearby a pile of dark, rich earth.

"I was just backing up there to spread that good dirt," he said to me, though I had not asked him anything. "I didn't even know she was outdoors." He stretched his hand toward the flower bed, then let it flop to his side.

. . . I went into the house to find someone who could provide a recent photo of the toddler. A few minutes later, with all the details in my notebook and a . . . studio portrait of the . . . child. . . in my . . . pocket, I went toward the kitchen where the police had said the body was.

. . . Entering the kitchen, I came upon this scene:

On a Formica-topped table, backlit by a frilly curtained window, lay the tiny body, wrapped in a clean white sheet. Somehow the grandfather had managed to stay away from the crowd. He was sitting on a chair beside the table in profile to me and unaware of my presence, looking uncomprehendingly at the swaddled corpse.

The house was very quiet. A clock ticked. As I watched, the grandfather slowly leaned forward, curved his arms like parentheses around the head and feet of the little form, then pressed his face to the shroud and remained motionless.

In that hushed moment I recognized the makings of a prize-winning news photograph. I appraised the light, adjusted the lens setting and distance, locked a bulb in the flashgun, raised the camera and composed the scene in the viewfinder.

Every element of the picture was perfect: the grandfather in his plain work clothes, his white hair backlit by sunshine, the child's form wrapped in the sheet, the atmosphere of the simple home. . . . Outside, the police could be seen inspecting the . . . pickup while the child's mother and father leaned in each other's arms.

I don't know how many seconds I stood there unable to snap that shutter. I was keenly aware of the powerful story-telling value that photo would have, and my professional conscience told me to take it. Yet I couldn't make my hand fire that flashbulb and intrude on the poor man's island of grief. At length I lowered the camera and crept away shaken with doubt about my suitability for the journalistic profession. Of course I never told the city editor or any fellow reporters about that missed opportunity for a perfect news picture.

Every day, on the newscasts and in the papers, we see pictures of people in extreme conditions of grief and despair. Human suffering has become a spectator sport. And sometimes, as I'm watching news film, I remember that day.

I still feel right about what I did. [James Alexander Thom, "The Perfect Picture," Readers Digest, Aug. 1976, p. 113-14]

As we look back to yesterday, last week, and last year, the question is “Do we feel right about what we did?” As you and I travel the treacherous way of mortal life, we kick up dust in our daily living. We make mistakes, but in quiet moments of meditation when the dust settles and we examine our thoughts and actions to carefully and honestly determine what it is we have to declare, all of us are required to make continuous “inflight correction.”

I like what C. S. Lewis has to say about that process. He says, “A wrong sum can be put right: but only by going back till you find the error and working it afresh from that point” (C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* [New York: Macmillan Company, 1948], p. 6). And who determines if it is an error? The regulations and policy officers? Yes, if they must, but hopefully not. To them it may not even be seen as an error. But that may not excuse you in your own mind. Let me tell you about this old wallet that was returned to me by a BYU student after nine years.

Answering the Hard Questions

As a student at BYU years ago, I had used the telephone in the Joseph Smith Building and had carelessly left my wallet in the booth. After returning to the lost and found department regularly for several days, I finally gave up my desperate hope of ever getting my wallet and the much needed money back. Nine years later, on a snowy afternoon, the mailman delivered a letter. It began, “To Whom It May Concern.” The letter stated that I was involved in some unfinished business at BYU. I wondered what unfinished business I needed to set in order. I found the name of the person who had signed the letter in the Salt Lake telephone directory. I dialed the number. I identified myself. The author of the letter began unfolding her story. As the words spilled out, I learned that this young woman was now a wife and mother, but earlier she had been in nurse’s training at BYU. She had worked and put herself through

school, but she needed an additional ten dollars for tuition, so she had turned to her boyfriend for help. She had promised to return the loan by the following Friday. When Friday arrived, in spite of her earnest prayers, she was still short ten dollars.

Seemingly without reason she had walked into the telephone booth and found an old worn wallet. She held her breath as she opened it to find a single ten dollar bill. Then the question: Was this indeed an answer to her prayer? She had learned that Satan knows when we are being tested and when we might weaken under pressure. She told of paying her boyfriend, whom she later married, graduating in nursing, and now raising a beautiful family.

She then poured out her heart as she told of her suffering for what she acknowledged as sin—sin because she had known better. For nine years, through many moves, the old burden had lain deeply tucked away in her top dresser drawer. It seemed impossible for her to throw away the wallet, though she considered it many times. There is no way you can throw away a wrong, and yet, there was no way, as far as she knew, to return the wallet—there was no identification.

One day while she was straightening the drawer, the old wallet surfaced again. This time she felt she must get rid of it, but only the right way. She thoughtfully opened the old wallet once again, and while examining it this time her fingers uncovered a small orange card tucked away in a tiny compartment not previously noticed. The card gave the address of the Calgary Clinic in Alberta, Canada, where the medical exam for the student’s visa had been given. With a prayer in her heart she took a chance and sent the letter “to whom it may concern” to the Calgary Clinic to be forwarded if possible. Contact had been made, but the wallet was yet to be returned. During the telephone conversation she indicated the wallet would be mailed that very day. I asked her if she would consider delivering the wallet in

person. She seemed a little embarrassed at the thought until I assured her it would be an honor and a privilege to meet a person possessing such honesty of character. She agreed that she would deliver it. At the appointed hour we met in my office. As I approached, she smiled nervously and then stood up. As though she had rehearsed this experience in her mind a hundred times, she reached out her steady hand, looked me squarely in the eye, and handed me the wallet as she whispered, "Will you please forgive me? I want to be honest." Words could not come. I could only reach for her hand and nod affirmatively.

As I frequently finger this old wallet that now lies in my top drawer, I ask myself "How honest do *you* want to be?" I've learned you must spend a little time walking around inside yourself to answer the hard questions in life.

In the novel *The Chosen*, by Chaim Potok, the Jewish father cries out to the master of the universe as he addresses him in prayer in behalf of his son who has a brilliant and capable mind. He says, "A mind like this I need for a son? A *heart* I need for a son, a *soul* I need for a son, *compassion* I want from my son, righteousness, mercy, strength to suffer and carry pain, *that* I want from my son, not a mind without a soul!" His son, speaking of his father, says, "He taught me to look into myself, to find my own strength, to walk around inside myself in company with my soul" (Chaim Potok, *The Chosen* [New York: Fawcett Crest Books, 1967], p. 265).

When you walk around inside yourself and find your own strength and live in company with your own soul, can you answer the questions the way you would like to? Would you have snapped the shutter of the camera in that private moment? And what about the wallet? When we get a wrong sum can we put it right? In a public setting, would there ever be a chance that you would succumb to the pressures of power or prestige or position or popularity? Might you one day have to report to a

judge, as did Jeb McGruder, who was sentenced to ten years in federal prison for his part in Watergate? He spoke to Judge Sirrica, saying, "My ambition obscured my judgment. Somewhere between my ambition and my ideals, I lost my ethical compass" ("Confession of Jeb McGruder," *Salt Lake Tribune*, 22 May 1974).

The Signals That Would Save Us

Our values, our road signs that keep us on course and on schedule, are not to be tucked away in a drawer for safekeeping but carried daily, used continuously, tested against our performance regularly, and literally worn out as a constant measuring device that keeps us accountable. The powers and plans of Satan are cunning and subtle and very real. You are not unfamiliar with the pirates that would attempt to board your ship almost daily, who would rob you of your treasures, your peace of mind, your self-discipline, your clear conscience, your commitment, your integrity, your morality, even your eternal destiny if possible, and leave you shipwrecked, washed up on shore. I believe the most destructive threats of our day are not nuclear war, not famine, not economic disaster, but rather the despair, the discouragement, the despondency, the defeat caused by the discrepancy between what we believe to be right and how we live our lives. We are on a stormy sea. These are threatening times and we may be ignoring or even cutting ourselves loose from the very signals that would save us.

I'd like to tell you about the time I and other family members crossed that Canadian-U.S. border with our Dad and Mom on our way back home, knowing that for Dad it would be the last time. As we cleared customs, Dad raised up from his sick bed in the back of the car and commented, "This prairie has never looked so beautiful. It's at its very best for my last inspection."

During our brief stay in our old hometown, we sauntered, haltingly, down the gravel road

past the tall cottonwood trees where the old school had been. Dad took the lead. “It was the old bell,” he said, and we all looked in the same direction, seeing it clearly in our mind’s eye. “The school bell kept us in line.” “There were two bells,” he went on, “a fifteen-minute bell would ring six times, giving ample warning before the final five-minute bell sounded a simple ding dong—and you’d better be there.” His weakened voice increased in intensity as he added, “It’s important to listen for the bell.”

As we mused together in silence for a time, I pondered the possibility of my own inner bell being silenced, if only for a moment—just a rest break, maybe. As if reading my thoughts, Dad lay back by the soft, grassy ditch where we had stopped and began with a familiar phrase we had all learned to love. “I remember the story in the old fourth-grade reader,” he said. He began his story.

“There was an old and very large Inchcape Rock. It got its name from being located just one inch below the water’s surface where it couldn’t be seen, and it lay dangerously in the path of the mariners returning from sea. Many seamen had lost their ships and their lives because of the rock, especially in times of storm. There was an abbot in the small seashore town of Aberbrothok who devised a solution to this life-threatening hazard. With great care and in the face of considerable danger, the abbot fastened a buoy with a large bell on it to the Inchcape Rock. From then on the bell rang continuously and faithfully with the motion of the waves of the sea. Ralph, the Rover, was a bit of pirate, and he disliked the praises the abbot received from the mariners whose lives he spared. So one day, Ralph, the Rover, cut the bell from the Inchcape Rock.”

Down sank the Bell with a gurgling sound; The bubbles rose, and burst around.

Quoth Sir Ralph, “The next who comes to the Rock, Won’t bless the Abbot of Aberbrothok.”

*Sir Ralph, the Rover, sailed away,
He scoured the seas for many a day.*

“On his way back it was night and the sea was high and he thought the moon would be up. In the darkness he said, with great anxiety, but only to himself, ‘I wish I could hear the bell of the Inchcape Rock,’ “ and the rhyme continued:

*Sir Ralph, the Rover, tore his hair;
He cursed himself in his despair.
The waves rush in on every side;
The ship is sinking beneath the tide. [“The Inchcape Rock,” Robert Southey]*

Dad’s stories always stood without any editorializing—left for me to figure out the message. I am not sure how I felt then, but in years since I have come to feel that rather than wishing to silence the bell within, I feel myself strain a little that I might hear it more clearly.

Make Ready for the Final Crossing

I hope we will always have a quiet longing for our heavenly home that keeps us always on course and on schedule with an anxiousness at the proper time to arrive at customs, eager to give an accounting. After our trip to Canada, Dad talked about going home on that final journey, and we talked together of the border crossing. His body now weighed less than 100 pounds, and his mortal journey was coming to a close. Dad talked about the sweetness and sacredness of these times and spoke of the nearness of the Lord, the Holy One of Israel, the gatekeeper. Life had presented ample and enough struggles, and he had used them to prove himself worthy and to cleanse his soul. And he was ready for the border crossing.

That last day, Dad spoke of Addison, his younger brother who had gone before him. I wondered if his brother, and maybe his mother and father, were standing at the kitchen window an hour before his expected arrival, anxious for his safe return home.

By midafternoon I had decided to sit with Dad. It seemed his eyes were open, yet he wasn't seeing me. I took his hand in mine, a hand that had spanked me and blessed me and caressed me throughout my life. "Dad," I whispered. He didn't respond. "If you know I'm here, please squeeze my hand." I wasn't sure if there was a squeeze, but it didn't seem like it. I bent over and put my cheek next to his very bony cheek with my hand on the other side of his face. I waited just a second, then straightened up. He looked at me just a moment, and in his eyes I saw complete peace. Joy, trust, confidence, and anticipation all mingled together in that look. He was ready for the border crossing and the gatekeeper, the Holy One of Israel. A tear escaped the corner of his eye. I pressed my cheek to his again. There are things we cannot find words or even sounds to express, but in that moment I had some sense of what that final crossing might be and the ecstasy that we'll never fully understand in this life.

Brothers and sisters, we will arrive at a border crossing and have an opportunity to make a declaration. We will remember then that we were free according to the flesh "to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great Mediator of all men, or to choose captivity and death, according to the captivity and power of the devil; for he seeketh that all men might be miserable like unto himself" (2 Nephi 2:27). The choices we make each day of our lives will make us what we are at that time. When we open our luggage on our final journey and make our declaration, will we be carrying grey-white laundry as evidence of the unwise choices we have made along the way?

There will be for each one of us many unwise choices, but when we do our part, a cleansing can take place and we will not be ashamed, but we will be so very, very grateful.

Alma's teaching explains it for us.

For there can no man be saved except his garments are washed white; yea, his garments must be purified until they are cleansed from all stain, through the blood of him of whom it has been spoken by our fathers, who should come to redeem his people from their sins. [Alma 5:21]

We are his children, you and I—the very ones for whom he gave his life. God is our father, and he loves us very much. He wants us to come home, to his home—our home after the completion of our time here. I know he guides us and comforts us and forgives us, that he hears our knock and waits at the gate for our return. And to the question "What have you to declare?" the answer will be written in the fleshy table of our heart, our journey at a glance. May we stand in confidence as evidence of our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, daily repentant, living true to the ordinances and covenants which qualify us for the companionship of the Holy Ghost and prepare us to stand as a witness of Christ at all times.

I bear you my solemn witness from years past, but now more surely than ever before in my life, perhaps because there has been an increased urgency and diligence in knocking and listening: I know he is near and hears and speaks to our minds, and we can know that with a sure conviction that cannot be denied. To this I bear my testimony and witness in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.