

“One Step Enough”

JOHN S. TANNER

In a facetious little essay entitled “On Transcendental Metaworry,”¹ the science writer Lewis Thomas observes that “Worrying is the most natural and spontaneous of all human functions. . . . Man is the Worrying Animal.” This rare capacity to worry, Thomas continues, “is a trait needing further development, awaiting perfection. Most of us tend to neglect the activity, living precariously out on the thin edge of anxiety but never plunging in.” To remedy this, Thomas recommends the practice of Transcendental Worry (or TW), preferably “before work and late in the evening just before insomnia.”

To practice TW, Thomas recommends the following: make yourself as uncomfortable as possible; tense all your muscles; close your eyes tight “until the effort causes a slight tremor of the eyelids”; focus on the muscular effort required to breathe (preferably attempting to breathe through one nostril at a time); then repeat to yourself a suitable mantra like “worry.” Soon you will experience the vertiginous pleasures of angst. Worries will circle in and out of your consciousness like carrion fowl—swirling images of burning rain forests, swelling pimples, unpaid Visa bills, the national debt, the Testing Center, expanding

waistlines, receding hairlines, late papers, and finals in classes you never attended. Surrender yourself wholly to this sense of anxiety. Then, if you are blessed with the right nervous temperament, you will sink into the final stage of TW: “pure worry about pure worry.” At this point you will have attained what Thomas calls “the Wisdom of the West,” or TMW, “Transcendental Metaworry.”

I confess that sometimes late at night, between wake and sleep, I experience this rarefied state of TMW, or worry about worry. I speak today as one personally familiar with what a song from the sixties called the “chilly hours and minutes of uncertainty.”² I do so, however, in order to speak of faith and hope, with which I am also intimately acquainted.

According to Parley P. Pratt, the pioneers who endured the first terrible winter in the Salt Lake valley suffered more from fear than from actual hunger?³ Think about that. Remember how hungry the Saints were: “The people tried eating crows, thistle tops, bark, roots, and Segó Lily bulbs—anything that might offer

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nutriment or fill the empty stomach.”⁴ Yet they suffered most from fear. For “the valley was new,” says Brother Pratt, “neither was it proven that grain could be raised.”⁵

Uncertainty can be more chilling than winter, doubt more gnawing than hunger, tempests of the mind more fearful than pelting rain. As Shakespeare’s *King Lear* remarks: “This tempest in my mind / Doth from my senses take all feeling else, / Save what beats there” (3.4.12–14).

And, in a similar vein, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn describes a peculiar reaction evident in many people picked up by the Soviet secret police: “Sometimes the principal emotion of the person arrested is relief and even *happiness!*” After all, Solzhenitsyn explains, there is a kind of exhaustion that is “worse than any kind of arrest.” He illustrates this point with the example of a priest who, having eluded arrest for eight years, “suffered so painfully from this harried life that when he was finally arrested in 1942 he sang hymns of praise to God.”⁶

Not knowing *when* or *if* an affliction will end is often more taxing than the affliction itself. This kind of suffering, which I call the ordeal within the ordeal, constitutes a perennial human predicament. Thus all ages echo the ancient cry “How long, O Lord, how long?”⁷ We suppose that we could brave most any hardship, provided we knew if and when it would pass. Think how patiently, for example, you older single students would bear being unmarried if you knew that in three years you would marry a good person—or, alternatively, that you would never marry. It is not being single but the uncertainty that can seem unendurable. Likewise, think how stoically you married students would cope with being poor if you were sure that your plight was temporary, that in time you would be able to afford the home you desire and find the employment you have prepared for. How much more courageously and cheerfully

would we endure our trials if we knew their outcome. Why, we might face even death more boldly if we but knew the time of our demise.

In periods of prolonged distress, we yearn for the Lord to carry us to a mountaintop, as he did Moses, and there reveal in detail the course of our lives (cf. Moses 1). Instead, God requires us to wander like Abraham, as “strangers and pilgrims on the earth” (Hebrews 11:13), living on promises. To live on this side of the veil is to “walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:7); it is to “feel after” the Lord (see Acts 17:27; D&C 101:8) as he lights our way home, one step at a time.

We have just sung lines by John Henry Newman that express this theme. Newman wrote “Lead, Kindly Light” aboard ship on the way home to England from Italy. He was homesick and seasick; he had just had malaria. Though he didn’t know it yet, he was also about to take the first faltering steps of a spiritual pilgrimage that ultimately would lead him, and many who followed him, to another church. In these circumstances, Newman writes:

*Lead, kindly Light, amid th’ encircling gloom;
Lead thou me on!
The night is dark, and I am far from home;
Lead thou me on!
Keep thou my feet; I do not ask to see
The distant scene—one step enough for me.
[Hymns, 1985, no. 97]*

The last line contains a phrase that became a motto for my wife, Susan, and me through long years of uncertainty in graduate school: “I do not ask to see the distant scene—*one step enough for me.*”

“One step enough.” How often Susan and I have taken comfort in this phrase. Yet even with those words on our lips, we still trod gingerly into a future that seemed so precarious and into which we could see safe footing for only one small step ahead. We craved precisely

what we professed not to ask for—namely, to see the distant scene. Like most everybody, we yearn for certainty and would avoid risk, if we could—or at least consign it to a risk manager. (What an intriguing modern invention, risk management. Wouldn't it be great if we could give over life's truly serious risks, like whom to marry or what to believe, to someone else?) Suspense makes us, well, nervous. Susan is the kind of reader who sometimes skips to the end of the novel when the suspense becomes too intense. I am the kind of fan who sometimes opts to watch a close game on replay, *after* I know the outcome.

The dramas of our own lives, however, are not available to us on video or in novels. We can neither fast forward nor read ahead. Because our tribulations unfold in real time, the only way out, alas, is through. This means we must endure not only our hardships but the ordeal of anxiety within the ordeal; it means we must live on promises and walk by faith.

To walk by faith is to follow in the footsteps of Abraham, the spiritual father of the faithful (Galatians 3:7), who must sojourn as pilgrims and strangers on this earth. In Hebrews we read:

By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went.

By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise. [Hebrews 11:8–9; emphasis added]

“Not knowing whither he went,” Abraham left not only his city but city life itself, in the cradle of civilization, to become a nomad. As Abraham so aptly puts it:

Therefore, eternity was our covering and our rock and our salvation, as we journeyed from Haran . . . to come to the land of Canaan. [Abraham 2:16]

Moreover, Abraham did not cease to be a nomad after he arrived in the promised land. Rather, even in Canaan he dwelt “in tabernacles” (i.e., tents), “as in a strange [i.e., foreign] country.” While his nephew Lot chose to live “in the cities” on the well-watered plain of Jordan (Genesis 13:10–12)—and reaped the consequence of that choice—Abraham dwelt not in cities. “For he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God” (Hebrews 11:10), and taught us by his example that “here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come” (Hebrews 13:14).

As Abram wandered through Canaan, he was promised the land over and over again (cf. Genesis 12:1–3, 7; 13:14–17; 15:18; 17:1–8). Yet when Sarah died, Abraham had to buy the cave of Machpelah in which to bury her. How poignant are Abraham's words to the sons of Heth, from whom he purchased the cave:

I am a stranger and a sojourner with you: give me a possession of a buryingplace with you, that I may bury my dead out of my sight. [Genesis 23:4]

The land was Abraham's by covenant, yet near the end of his life he did not even own a plot of ground sufficient to inter Sarah's body. Later, Abraham was buried in this same cave, the only property he ever owned in Canaan (Genesis 25:9–10). No wonder Stephen the Martyr says that the Lord gave Abraham “none inheritance” in Canaan, “no, not so much as to set his foot on,” but promised only that he *would* give Abraham the land “for a possession, and to his seed after him, when as yet he had no child” (Acts 7:5).

Abraham spent all his days living on promises—not only with respect to the promised land but also with respect to a promised posterity. With what could seem like cruel irony, the Lord repeatedly pledged Abram posterity as numerous as the dust of the earth and the stars of heaven (Genesis 13:16; 15:4–5; 17:2–4; 18:17–19; 22:16–18). He

also changed his name to Abraham, meaning *father of a multitude*. Yet all the while Abraham had no promised heir; all the while he and Sarah were growing older.

At last, of course, Isaac was born. Then the God of Abraham, who seems to have a keen sense of irony, required the sacrifice of the very child through whom the prophecies that Abraham's seed would become "a great and mighty nation" were to be fulfilled (Genesis 18:18). How is it that Abraham "staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief" (Romans 4:20), but "believed in the Lord," who "counted it to him for righteousness" (Genesis 15:6; cf. Galatians 3:6).

We distort the trials of Abraham (or of anyone else) if we read them from the comfortable retrospective of history. Rather, as Kierkegaard reminds us, we must remember the fear and trembling.⁸ We must flee with Abram from Haran, not knowing whither we go, with eternity as our rock; we must wander with Abram in Canaan, living on increasingly incredible promises about possessing the land and a great posterity; we must journey with Abraham to Mount Moriah, prepare the altar for Isaac, and lift the knife. We must, in short, become "contemporaneous"⁹ with Abraham in his trials. Only then will we begin to understand why Abraham is the father to the faithful, the model for all those who, like him, die

in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.

For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country. . . .

. . . a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city. [Hebrews 11:13–14, 16]

The scriptures are replete with examples of Abrahamic faith. Lehi's example comes readily

to mind. Like Abraham, Lehi fled from his home, "dwelt in a tent," and was led by faith to a better country. Also like Abraham, Lehi seems to have left Jerusalem "not knowing whither he went." Nephi's account, at any rate, depicts Lehi first fleeing into the wilderness and only later learning that the Lord intended to lead him to a new world (cf. 1 Nephi 2). That Lehi's family made several return trips to Jerusalem may be explained, in part, by their unfolding knowledge of the journey they were undertaking. Perhaps they had to learn that their exile was to be an exodus.

Likewise, missionaries in every age have always had to walk by faith—from the sons of Mosiah, who journeyed to the land of the Lamanites on the strength of prophetic promises (Mosiah 28:7; Alma 17:10–12), to modern-day missionaries like Wilford Woodruff, who followed the Spirit's prompting to go south to Hertfordshire, where he baptized hundreds.¹⁰ All those who embrace the gospel become the progeny of Abraham (Abraham 2:10; Galatians 3:7) and like him have to walk by faith, one step at a time.

This includes prophets of our day. I will never forget a conversation with President Harold B. Lee that taught me this. President Lee (who, by the way, loved the hymn "Lead, Kindly Light") had talked freely that day about a new program the Church had just announced. He then remarked that he had just reread the minutes of the meetings in which the program had been formulated and that he saw now, in retrospect, that the Lord had been guiding the deliberations all along. What a remarkable description of revelation! The Lord's guidance was not fully evident, even to his prophet, until President Lee turned to survey the terrain he had traversed. The Lord led his servant, yes, but one step at a time.

This lesson impressed me, but it should not have surprised me. For even Jesus "received not of the fulness at the first, but received grace for grace And thus he was called the Son

of God, because he received not of the fulness at the first" (D&C 93:12, 14). He was called the Son *because* he received not of the fulness at the first. Does this imply that Jesus' human limitations define the essence of his sonship (or mortality), just as they do ours? Does this mean that he had to learn his mission incrementally and live through trials without knowing the beginning from the end? I note that the Lord often had to fast and pray to obtain the Father's unfolding will. And Jesus' astonishing plea that he "might not drink the bitter cup" (D&C 19:18) suggests that the Savior's prescience of the Atonement did not preclude his very human apprehension about the ensuing ordeal. In this, as "in all things it behoved him to be made like unto his brethren" (Hebrews 2:17). "For verily he took not on him the nature of angels; but took on him the seed of Abraham" (Hebrews 2:16).

Now, lest anyone think these examples of faith too remote, I wish now to speak more personally, sharing my own experiences and those of others who have influenced me. I do so not to boast but to bear witness of heaven's mercies and miracles. I do so in gratitude to God and with the hope that my experiences might give others courage to hope.

I come from a heritage of Abrahamic faith. Shortly after the original John Tanner was converted, he felt prompted to sell his beautiful farm in Lake George, New York, and move to Kirtland, Ohio—not knowing he was led there by the Spirit to help rescue the Church from severe debt. Several more times he and his family left everything to follow the Saints—from Kirtland to Jackson, from Jackson to Nauvoo, from Nauvoo to Salt Lake. With each move Father Tanner and his family became poorer; with each dislocation they had to start anew. But because eternity was their rock, they left their progeny a legacy of faith more precious than gold.

My paternal grandparents lost two grocery stores in the Depression. Their sole remaining

possession of value was a home. Then came a mission call to their oldest son, my uncle, who assumed it was impossible for him to serve. "Of course you will go," his parents told him. They sold their home and moved into an attic apartment. Friends were very critical, and, from a practical point of view, their criticism was justified, for my grandparents lived many more years but never again owned a home of their own. Yet they gave their sons, including my father, something more valuable than an estate. They gave them an Abrahamic legacy of faith.

Likewise, my own parents have walked with a faith of truly biblical proportions. Despite a world war, long years of school, and never knowing financial stability, they got the education and had the family they felt the Lord expected of them. Mom walked across the stage to receive her diploma when she was expecting her first child. Six of us had been born by the time Dad received his Ph.D. Seven more children were still to come, this despite constant economic uncertainty from my father's self-employment. Yet my parents sent ten children on missions, often with more than one in the field at once, and made sure that all thirteen graduated from college.

My folks worked very hard for this. And we, too, were expected to sacrifice: to save for missions, to put ourselves through college. But besides hard work, my parents exhibited heroic faith.

In stories like these it is easy—too easy—to see the faith and miss the fear. But you can't miss the fear and trembling when it is your own history. In 1974, when I was a senior at BYU, the job market for English professors was desperately tight and predicted to get much worse. It seemed only prudent to do something practical, like apply to law school. But as I wrote Duke Law School the obligatory essay on "Why I Want to Be an Attorney When I Grow Up," it struck me, with the force of revelation, that I did *not* want to be an attorney.

I wanted to teach, preferably Renaissance literature. What's more, I felt the Lord wanted me to teach. So I tore up my essay and applied instead to graduate school in English. The distant scene seemed so uncertain; all the forecasts said not to follow the less-trodden path I was taking. Yet the little light that illuminated my feet seemed to point to graduate school. A way was soon opened up for me to go to the University of California at Berkeley, but only one step ahead.

At about the same time that I tore up my law school application, I got engaged. I was painfully aware that all I had to offer my bride were long years in graduate school and then the prospect of no employment in my chosen field. Plus, I had only enough money for one quarter's tuition. Susan and I also both wanted children and felt this was our first priority. I was inexpressibly happy about my marriage, but also very anxious about the uncertain future. So I sought a blessing from my father. I received, like Abraham, promises—cherished, treasured promises, but nothing you could take to the loan officer at the bank: the Lord is mindful of your desires; he knows your concerns and approves this marriage; the way will be opened to complete your education through means you cannot now conceive.

Six long years and four children later I had my degree and, miraculously, a job in my field. Way after way had indeed been opened before us. For example, a housesitting job that we thought would last only a few months became, through the generosity of saintly Jim and Roma Sabine, three years of rent-free housing. I was able to find full-time night-watchman jobs at which I could study all night and go to school all day. And even when we were making only sixty dollars a month on my early-morning seminary salary, we paid tithing. The Lord was on our right hand and on our left, lighting our way one step at a time.

Many times I doubted the future. I could meet the present distress but was anxious

about the future. How often would I lament: "What am I doing to myself and my family! There are no jobs in English. I can't complete a Ph.D. anyway. After all, I almost flunked freshman English. I can't write. I can't even spell. What madness to think I can do a dissertation!"

Still the years stretched on. Still anxiety enveloped my faith. My former roommates completed law school, took real jobs, bought cars and homes. My best friend went on to clerk at the Supreme Court. I, meanwhile, pulled weeds at the Oakland Temple as a gardener and worried about completing a seemingly interminable degree. Yet I persisted, borrowing generously from the faith of my wife, whose unshakable conviction that teaching was my vocation kept us walking down an uncertain path, one step at a time.

How much more courageously could I have lived on promises had my faith been as strong as hers. I am reminded of the ending of John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, which portrays Christian and Hopeful crossing the river of death. There "was no bridge to go over," Bunyan writes, and "the river was very deep." The two pilgrims begin to despair, for there is no way across except through. Then they learn this truth: "You shall find it [the river] deeper or shallower, as you believe in the King of the place."¹¹ Susan generally finds the river shallower than I. Both of us, however, have to wade through rivers with bottoms we cannot see.

As do all who sojourn through mortality. To be human is to be a pilgrim and stranger, homeward bound. No mortal ever ceases to need faith, for faith is a "task for a whole lifetime."¹² Indeed, to believe, to love, to repent, to forgive—these tasks are always more than enough for any human life. Nor do moderns start ahead of the ancients with respect to eternally significant tasks such as faith and love. We all start where Adam and Eve did as they left the garden. Let me borrow from Milton's

account of this moment in the concluding lines of *Paradise Lost*:

*The World was all before them, where to choose
Thir place of rest, and Providence thir guide:
They hand in hand with wand'ring steps and slow,
Through Eden took thir solitary way. [12.646–49]*

So the world that lies before us bids us “choose our place of rest” and offers us Providence as our guide. If we are lucky, we will find someone to hold hands with as, “with wandering steps and slow,” we make our “solitary way” toward home.

Now, since it has been much on my mind this past year, I want to illustrate my theme with one final personal example. This example is drawn from my recent experience drafting an academic freedom policy for BYU. Then I will offer one caution, and then I am done.

About a year ago, Bruce Hafen asked me to chair a committee that would draft recommendations on academic freedom. Knowing this issue had swamped far larger vessels than my small craft, I did what any of you would have done. I had an anxiety attack and looked for the nearest exit. Over the next several months, I tried lots of creative evasion strategies, but I also felt a growing conviction that maybe, just maybe, this was work I was supposed to do. Perhaps, unknown to me, this is why I studied Milton and Kierkegaard, two ardent advocates of liberty and faith. I felt the tug of Mordecai's question to Esther: “And who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” So, like Esther, I went forward, resolving, “And if I perish, I perish” (Esther 4:14, 16).

Way after way seemed to open as my committee came up against seemingly impossible impasses. For this, I thank both heaven and the hard work, intelligence, and goodwill of my committee. I do not say the work that we have done is inspired in every point; we have

already received many good suggestions for improvements. But when I look back at where we have been, the journey that sometimes seemed tortuous and circuitous in the treading of it now seems straighter and more purposeful. I hope this work will bless the university. This has been the only intention of every member of the committee. And I hope that as BYU continues to nurture a community of thoughtful faith, it will also grow as a community of charity that remembers that the prayer “Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief” (Mark 9:24) is the prayer of a believer.

Now the final caution I promised. What I have said today does not mean that we should seek out risk, court anxiety, or take reckless chances. There is a difference between foolhardiness and faith. If you are the sort of person who likes risks, this is not the talk for you. We have an obligation to prepare for the future, to count the cost before we build, to study out decisions intelligently as well as prayerfully. We should be careful, and we should be wise.

Nevertheless, we must not trust only in our own wisdom. As George Santayana asserts,

*It is not wisdom to be only wise,
And on the inward vision close the eyes,
But it is wisdom to believe the heart.
Columbus found a world, and had no chart,
Save one that faith deciphered in the skies;
Our knowledge is a torch of smoky pine
That lights the pathway but one step ahead
Across a void of mystery and dread.
Bid, then, the tender light of faith to shine
By which alone the mortal heart is led
Unto the thinking of the thought divine.¹³*

May the Lord light our various pathways, though it be “but one step ahead / Across a void of mystery and dread.” And may we, as covenant children of Abraham, have the faith to follow that heavenly light home. This I pray, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Endnotes

1. *The Medusa and the Snail* (New York: Bantam, 1974), 66–70.
2. “Catch the Wind,” by Donovan.
3. Eugene England, *Brother Brigham* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980), 146.
4. Leonard Arrington, *Great Basin Kingdom* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1958), 49.
5. Arrington, *Brother Brigham*, 146.
6. *The Gulag Archipelago, I–II*, trans. Thomas P. Witney (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 14–15.
7. Cf. Psalms 13:1–2, 35:17, 89:46, Habakkuk 1:2, Alma 14:26, D&C 121:2–3.
8. See *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard’s meditation on the faith of Abraham.
9. See Kierkegaard’s *Training in Christianity*, trans. Walter Lowrie, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 66ff.
10. This story has been told many times. For a recent history of the event, see *Truth Will Prevail*, eds. Bloxham et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1987), 132–40.
11. *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, ed. N. H. Keeble (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 128.
12. *Fear and Trembling*, 42 (cf. 145–46). See also George Herbert’s poem “The Agonie,” which notes how some truths, like love and sin, are deeper than philosophy and science can measure.
13. “O World, Thou Chooseth Not” [1894].