

WE GLORY IN TRIBULATIONS ALSO: KNOWING THAT TRIBULATION WORKETH PATIENCE.

ALL CHILDREN ARE
ALIKE UNTO ME

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“And I am filled with charity, which is everlasting love; wherefore, all children are alike unto me; Wherefore I love little children with a perfect love; and they are all alike and partakers of salvation. For I know that God is not a partial God, neither a changeable being, but he is unchangeable from all eternity to all eternity.” (Moroni 8:17-18)

“I’m sure that you wouldn’t be interested in the only position I have to offer you. We do need a teacher in our Negro school but the problems are insurmountable. The children are undisciplined and can’t learn, the parents are ignorant, and the school’s as dirty as a pigpen.”

This pronouncement by a school superintendent amazed and challenged me. I had made a hurried decision to return to teaching because of my husband’s illness and had applied for a position in several districts a few days before the opening of school. In spite of the grim picture presented by the superintendent I asked him for the assignment. Unknowingly he opened a door for me into a fascinating, challenging but frustrating world. I thought that I loved and understood all children, but I was totally ignorant of the problems that beset our racial minorities. Having grown up in a small Utah town, I had little experience with Negroes and, worse, I had not thought seriously about their problems. I am appalled that I could have been so blind and ignorant, so indifferent and unconcerned. Twenty-five years later I am still baffled by the complexity of the problems of the Negro in our society.

As I faced my first class of twenty-four fifth graders on the opening day of school, I experienced something completely new to me. There was absolutely no response to me as a person. No matter what I did or said there was dead silence. If I turned my back for a second, there was flagrant misbehavior.

We dismissed the children early and I decided to seek advice from the principal. There was a hodge-podge of books and trash in every cupboard and I needed help in identifying the current state textbooks. I hoped that he might also give me some insight into the particular problems of these children. He dismissed me abruptly stating that he had been informed that I had formerly been a teacher and a principal and as far as he was concerned I could solve my own problems. Angry and perplexed, I returned to my classroom and began the dreary task of cleaning cupboards and organizing books and materials.

I found an amazing number of fifth grade readers — all with the same title. I took one of them, chose a story, and put a set of questions on the blackboard. I also prepared arithmetic and language assignments. The next day I passed out paper and pencils, explained the assignments, and told the children to go to work, hoping I could evaluate them as they did so. Nothing happened. The entire class simply sat and stared into space. I was at a complete loss. It never occurred to me that most of the children could not read a word I had written and were too proud to tell me so. After my abrupt dismissal of the day before, I felt I could not ask advice from the principal. So at recess time I sought out a kindly-looking older teacher who had been in the school a number of years. She laughed and explained to me that very few Negro children *could* be taught to read. A few of the brighter ones catch on but as far as the rest are concerned, “the less you worry about them the better. Put in a day’s work, close the door and go home and forget about them.” This advice deeply troubled me and raised some serious questions. Why couldn’t they read? Was it lack of motivation? What relationship did the color of one’s skin have to do with one’s reading ability? Lack of cultural opportunity would certainly influence the children, but native ability must be there.

It was apparent that before I could experience any degree of success I must establish a basis of mutual love and respect. The children didn’t trust or respond to me in the way that children always had. Some of them would cringe when I put my hand to touch a shoulder or to give a pat. James even fell to the floor one day and begged me not to hit him. They were convinced they were not likeable human beings.

My solution to his problem came about inadvertently. The annual P.T.A. carnival was held on Halloween eve. I decided to dress as a forty-niner. I marvel now that I had the courage to appear in such an outlandish costume. But it was a great success as far as my pupils were concerned. They began to see me as a person. Years afterward they would laugh with me about the night I “let down my hair.”

But it was my little blond three-year-old son who brought love and understanding. He came to the school for a brief time one Friday afternoon and his visit was such a success that it became a weekly event. The boys would ride him piggyback around the school yard, teach him to throw and catch a ball and vie for the privilege of sharing their seats with him. Their love for him was sincere and wholesome, and he reciprocated their feelings.

Now I felt that the pupils and I understood each other, and that we could discuss their problems frankly. I tried to make them realize how many opportunities they would miss and how narrow their lives would be if they could not read. Would they work hard and cooperate with me? They would and they did!

It was fortunate that my group was as small as it was that year. The five or six children who could read were given individual assignments and also worked as helpers. I bargained for some pre-primers from the first grade teachers and we began at the beginning. There was not a single library book in the school. Each of the children tried to bring a quarter and we built up a library of Little Golden books.

These were not too satisfactory because the vocabularies were difficult. I secured an application card from the public library for each child and told them we'd walk to the library together as soon as their cards were signed. They looked at me dubiously. "We can't go there," they said.

"Of course we can. The walk will be good for you."

"But we can't go there. The lady won't let colored kids use the library."

With wrath I confronted the librarian a few hours later.

"We've never admitted those children. They can't read, they're noisy, and they're dirty."

I was infuriated. I contacted the superintendent and the city fathers and a week later we had our trip. The librarian glowered while we happily selected books. It was a magical incentive!

The children worked hard and I wished desperately for more know-how and even more for suitable books. It was sad to see those big boys and girls working on silly little primers that bore no relationship to their lives or experiences. I'll never forget Bernice. She was very unattractive physically, wore glasses and had been considered hopeless. When the world of books opened up to her, she wouldn't leave them alone. She walked out of the room with her head bent over a book, read on the playground and walked back to the classroom still engrossed. "I can read!" she'd exclaim to anyone she might meet.

The children's progress was solid and satisfactory and we did many interesting things together. There were a few low achievers whose learning was slow but the rest of the children read at grade level or above by the end of the year. Their gratitude was touching. How I learned to love those children! David and Jonathan, Betty and Mimi, Dickie and Ellis, shy little Mexican born Margaret, and on down the list.

David and Jonathan, twin sons of a minister, loved my young son and often came to play with him on Saturdays. He reciprocated their love and envied their "sun tan." One day our next door neighbors, two Victorian spinsters, made derogatory remarks to my children about their "nigger" friends. The boys never returned. When I urged them to do so they refused, saying that they did not want to do anything that would reflect on my children.

Dickie, too, had great affection for my son. He worshipped him, he who had never known parents or love. How could I reprimand him when he arrived at our home with his pockets full of trinkets — source unknown? Dickie was learning to live and each day becoming less of a problem to me.

During the year the girls in my room joined a Girl Scout troop. They wore their uniforms proudly. I was horrified one morning when Betty and Mimi announced that they had been chased by a white woman with a gun when they were out selling Girl Scout cookies the night before. "We crossed the line," they said.

"What line?" I asked.

"You know, the line where the white folks live." It was unbelievable to me that Betty, the joy of my classroom, and fun-loving Mimi could have been so threatened.

The first year came to an end. It has always been difficult for me to

lose my pupils at promotion time. I sadly approached my classroom that last afternoon, and when I entered the entire class arose. David eloquently declared that they were standing in tribute to the first teacher who had loved and truly helped them. Then he presented me with perfume and a lovely bouquet of flowers. I had learned much and so had they.

Many of those children have done well. Betty is a master teacher in the Los Angeles public schools. David is a graduate of an eastern school of divinity and is now a minister in a neighboring city. Dickie was a runner on the United States Olympic team. Ellis was the athlete of the year when a senior at our local high school. The success of these youngsters is an indication of the potential we have wasted in our segregated areas.

II

That year was just the beginning. We moved to the city where the school was located and it became an integral part of our family life. My husband and children shared my joys and sorrows, my frustrations and my successes. The pupils and staff were a very real part of our family for seventeen years and the school almost a second home. I was appointed principal after my third year of teaching and the dedicated teachers who served with me have become my lifelong friends. Before long the school was shining clean and brightened by flowers and plants and artwork. We had the beginning of a fine library housed in a large closet at the end of the auditorium. Good teachers, both Negro and white, helped me set high standards of honesty, behavior, and achievement and they were maintained with a reasonable degree of success.

Through the years I succeeded in attracting a number of outstanding Mormon teachers to the school. Their contributions cannot be measured. One teacher, in particular, profoundly influenced the lives of those she taught. She was a genius in teaching children to read. This same teacher helped me present a beautiful Christmas program my last year at the school. We taught the children to sing my favorite Christmas carol, "Far, Far Away on Judea's Plains," with my secretary (who was also our ward organist) as accompanist. I love to recall the strains of "Glory to God" as it resounded that night in the large Junior High School auditorium. I wish the whole world could have heard their "Peace on earth, good will to men."

And then there was an earlier Christmas. Blanche and her brother Joel were both bedfast with rheumatic fever when the holidays were approaching. They lived with their grandparents in a tiny house. The grandfather had been an invalid for years and the grandmother did domestic day work. What better opportunity for service could there be than for their classmates to give these children a happy Christmas? Pennies, nickles and dimes were collected and a committee appointed to shop. Robes and pajamas for both children were selected as well as a doll for Blanche and a game for Joel. There were also books, trinkets and a tree trimmed with goodies to eat. It was a wonderful project. School closed a week before the holiday and the children wanted me to deliver the gifts on Christmas Eve. That home became radiant to me because of the gratitude and faith of the dear little seventy-year-old grandmother. I had said goodbye to the family — there were four younger children in addition to Blanche and Joel — and

the grandmother followed me out to the rickety porch. I commented to her about the lovely view she had of the mountains. "Oh yes," she replied. "Every morning I come out here and thank my Heavenly Father for all my rich blessings and for the opportunity I have to serve Him in caring for these dear children. How can one person be so blessed?"

"Yea, blessed are the poor in spirit who come unto me, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (III Nephi 12:3)

It was during my fifth year at this school that my husband died and my world turned bleak. Several days after the funeral dear Mrs. Gates came to see me. "I'm so glad that they chose me to attend your husband's funeral," she said.

She self-consciously replied that the Negro community had feared that I might be embarrassed if too many of their number attended the services, so three were appointed as representatives. She was one of the three. Her statement devastated me. These friends of mine, many of them tied to me with deep spiritual bonds, had felt that I might be embarrassed by their presence! How could I make them understand that I truly believe that "all are alike and partakers of salvation." The hurt became more acute when Mrs. Gates continued, "That was the most beautiful spiritual experience I have ever had. A door was opened just a crack and I had a brief glimpse of heaven. Do you know how rich you are?"

". . . and he inviteth them all to come unto him and partake of his goodness and he denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female, and he remembereth the heathen; and all are alike unto God. . . ." (II Nephi 26:33)

I recall with deep emotion the first Christmas Eve after my husband's death. Getting things in readiness for Christmas morning had always been such a very special time for us, a brief period that we treasured throughout the year. This night my loneliness was almost more than I could bear. A close friend had come to help me carry in the sewing machine that was the long planned-for surprise for my daughters. His departure heightened my feeling of aloneness. It was almost midnight when I heard a soft knock on the door. I hesitated opening it until I heard a familiar voice calling my name. It was my Negro custodian and his wife bearing a freshly baked, beautifully decorated cake. "We knew this would be a difficult time for you. We've come to visit for a little while." How could they know? What special intuitive sense had given them such insight? I retired after their visit with a sweet feeling of peace.

"And again, blessed are all they that mourn, for they shall be comforted." (III Nephi 12:4)

III

And so the memories crowd my mind. There were highlights and great joys generously interspersed with times of such overwhelming discouragement that I felt crushed and defeated. There were problem teachers, ignorant, misinformed laymen, disinterested parents. Do-gooders who became a nuisance, overcrowded classrooms, and shortages of suitable books and materials. But the hardest of all were the unfulfilled needs of neglected children. I wanted more for these children than I could possibly give.

Educators speak glibly of the need for love and security for every child. I can still recall the repugnance that swept through me when I had an intimate look at the rental that had housed eight children who attended our school. The District purchased property that adjoined the school for the purpose of expansion. One house on this property had been owned by a prominent local businessman. The upstairs, or ground level “apartment,” had three rooms. The floor was full of gaping holes caused by termites. Most of the windows were broken and paper or boards replaced the glass. The plumbing on this floor consisted of a toilet and a sink with one tap. The semi-basement “apartment” was one room with unpainted concrete walls and floor. One tap extended from the wall and there was a drain in the middle of the floor. A single light dangled from the ceiling. The rentals had netted the landlord over a hundred dollars a month. The two unwed mothers of the families who had just been evicted worked as domestics in the more affluent section of our city, leaving early in the morning and returning late at night. There was far more security in the streets for these children than in their own homes. How could we possibly fulfill the desperate needs of such children?

The most crushing defeats that I suffered came through the failure of some of the children to live up to my hopes for them, just as a parent suffers over the sins of wayward children. There was Ruth, extremely bright, musical and artistic. Her work, even in the first grade, was remarkable. She was an only child and her parents were delighted to hear of her great potential. Both were employed and I urged them to begin saving for Ruth’s college education. I loved that modest little girl. I was able to pave the way for her at the high school and a generous four-year scholarship was awarded to her in her junior year. The future looked bright for Ruth, but in the early part of her senior year she became pregnant and quit school. Her paramour, also a former pupil of mine, was a married man with two children and several arrests for dope peddling. What environmental factors contributed to this sad situation? How had we failed Ruth? I had no answers, but my sorrow was great.

And then there was Philip — intelligent, fun-loving, and affectionate but always mischievous. His parents were extremely devout, to the extent of denying him many simple pleasures enjoyed by the other children. As a young teen-ager he began associating with a gang involved in petty crime. One thing led to another and the end was inevitable. After serving his first prison sentence, Philip came to see me, “You’re terribly disappointed in me, aren’t you?” he said.

“Disappointed and sad. How could you get so deeply involved?”

“It was exciting at first,” he said — this boy who had been deprived of watching a simple cartoon movie. Then he told me he had come to make me a promise. He was beginning a new life. He would still make me proud of him. But two days later he was involved in an armed robbery just a few blocks from the school. Gang pressure was undoubtedly too much for him. His young but old face still haunts me.

Eight years ago I was transferred from the predominantly Negro school. Since then much needed help has come to such schools through reduction

of class size, use of teacher aides, provision of new and exciting books and materials, and programs for the pre-schoolers. The greatest need, however, is still for well-trained, dedicated teachers who can set high ideals but yet be able to face reality, because many of the old and troublesome problems remain. There are still neglected children who are the product of promiscuity. There is ignorance, hatred, prejudice and even violence. But I have great faith in the future for I have experienced so much that is wonderful and good.

John came to see me the other day. He looked neat and well dressed and wore his usual infectious smile. He is now employed by the gas company and announced proudly that he has two young children and has made a down payment on a home. He saved the money while serving in the Army for six years with a two-year tour of duty in Viet-Nam. "I'm happy and grateful for my opportunities," he said. "I hate the war but I'm proud that I could serve my country."

John's visit was significant to me because he opened up a vista of memories — amusing, sad, and at times quite incredible. I even recalled the day he entered Kindergarten, because of his unforgettable smile and lovely manners. He lived with his twelve brothers and sisters down the street from the school, in extreme poverty. His father, a chronic alcoholic, was a liability to the family. Bertha, his mother, a local high school graduate, gave birth to thirteen children. All lived with their blind grandmother in a two room shack with a chicken coop converted into a boys' dormitory. Most of the children were academically unpromising but John and one sister had a divine spark. Their story cannot be told here, but John survived the death of his mother, then that of his beloved grandmother. He was shifted between relatives from California to New York and back again, and finally he joined the Army. Through it all he remained clean and honest, devoted to his brothers and sisters and loyal to his own little family.

"Behold, the Lord esteemeth all flesh in one; he that is righteous is favored of God." (I Nephi 17:35)

Three years ago I attended the local high school graduation ceremonies. My heart almost burst with pride as I congratulated the student body president, the senior class president, the honor student with a four-year scholarship to a top university, and the athlete of the year — all my boys! "We owe much to you," repeated many times, has made me deeply humble for the unique opportunity I had to serve these, my "black and beautiful" friends.

"If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?" (I John 4:20)