

STEPPING OUT

Duane L. Herrmann

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She screamed at his back as he turned to go. He took his straw hat off the refrigerator as he walked past and put it on his head while stepping out the door. His steps were slow, as if he didn't want to go but couldn't bear to stay any longer. Out in the yard his stride quickened, then he eagerly mounted the tractor and roared out of the yard.

The din of the children always quieted a bit as we listened to the roar fade down the road. We knew we would not see him again until long after dark. Then he would drag himself in and collapse at the kitchen table, often falling asleep before leftovers could be heated and brought to him.

After eating he would take a bath in the dirty water left from the little boys and climb wearily to bed. She would take her bath in fresh water and primp in front of the mirror before going up to the dark room. On good nights he would talk and maybe laugh as he teased her. On hot summer nights they were quiet.

The days succeeded each other in routine monotony. The only variation became the seasons; in summer the heat was suffocating, in winter the ice and snow had to be slodged through to do the outside chores. Spring and fall were tolerable, but too brief to be noticed much.

Day after dreary day he left the house early for work on some part of the farm and returned to the house late in the evening, too exhausted to do more than fall asleep. Some nights he fell asleep with his head on the table moments after brushing his supper plate aside. She screamed. She riled at the limits she had imposed on her life. Of course she blamed him, he was the most convenient one to be at fault. No one would have guessed there was any affection between this married couple. We children could not see it.

The littler children were oblivious to all but their immediate needs and desires. They would eat what I fixed for them, if they liked it, otherwise they would complain to her and I would have to fix each something special. Once their stomach's were full, they would go their own separate ways. Those were the peaceful moments. When they occasionally tried to play together, they more often than not ended up fighting, or one would attack another. I just wanted to get away.

But I couldn't get away. There was the garden to plant, weed, harvest and food to put up, the pigs to be fed scraps and watered, the chickens to feed and water and eggs to gather and clean, the trash to be hauled or burned and clothes to be sorted, washed, rinsed, dried, and put away. All that was in addition to the endless cooking, the mountains of dirty dishes to be washed, dried and put away, and any other cleaning. Once in a while I could take a walk alone in the pasture away from the house, maybe at night when the stars were out and the breeze had cooled to a damp heat. Those walks were so precious, so real, I hated to bring them to an end. Only when walking in the pasture did I feel free.

There was no where else to go. Just one neighbor lived near enough to walk to and no town for miles. Some Sundays mother would insist we go to church as a family. It was the "proper" thing to do. Church was pleasant, but seeing us together, and quiet, was an odd sight. The rest of the time we moved in our separate lives.

In time, I was old enough to go to college, though it was only a local school. I moved to a tiny room in a house in town. Life was suddenly so simple, uncomplicated and peaceful. It was my first time to be alone. The quiet and peace in that house was so intense, it kept me awake. I felt out of touch with the seasons and didn't even know when the crops would need rain. Walking across the sun-baked campus I could close my eyes and imagine the wind was blowing across the pasture, and I was back there where I belonged.

A few months into the semester I saw a poster that said: "If you have all the answers, we need you. If you have questions, you may need us," and announced a meeting. The sponsored was "Baha'i Community," - whatever that was. Out of curiosity, I went.

The address was that of a simple house. As I stepped inside the door I heard the words: "From the sweet scented streams of Thine eternity give me to drink, O my God..." Suddenly a crisp breeze blew inside me with raindrops that sharpened every sense, awakening and heightening my awareness of worlds unseen. Before I could recover my thoughts I heard another line. "From the crystal springs of Thy love suffer me to quaff, O my Glory..." I was plunged into a limitless ocean, my soul gasping in awe of the endless expanse.

The words must have been magic, certainly there was nothing else around me to provoke such a reaction. And none of the others in the room seemed to be bothered, they were all sitting calmly, but within me were raging feelings and sensations as I had never experienced before. What was going on, I did not know.

I was brought back to earth with the phrase, "Within the meadows of Thy nearness, before Thy presence, make me able to roam, O my Beloved..." I was in a familiar pasture, but with a difference. The searing heat and wind were gone, in their place were cool, fragrant breezes. Flowers that I had never seen before were in bloom and I was filled with an assurance that I had never before experienced: assurance that no matter what names I had been called, or epithets hurled at me regarding the greatness of my stupidity, laziness, or clumsiness, I was acceptable to the Creator of the Universe. My being, my essence, was found worthy of existence in the grand scheme launched by the Creator of All There Is.

I had never experienced the like in all my life. The words I was hearing were a bit unfamiliar, but there must have been some power in them to convey such sensations. I wanted to learn more. I wanted to immerse myself in those words till I would need to come up for air. I wanted to be in touch with the power that came through them. I could not believe what was happening to me. The words had touched a core inside that I had not realized existed. And it was aching to be filled.

Suddenly, it seemed as if my whole life to this moment was just a shadow. Things that I had thought were important faded into insignificance. Little things that I had not noticed, little kindnesses, little beauties, appeared in a truer context as part of the growth of my soul. My view of people was turned upside down, but despite that upheaval it was refreshing, stimulating and invigorating. And finally, assuring. I was sure this was ÷itù, like I have never been sure of anything in my life before. The power was so strong I could almost touch it.

If these words and this power had been part of my childhood, part of my life in the country, it would all have been so much different. There would not have been the pain, and we would have learned a purpose for the things that befell us. We would have been aware of our own growth and how we could help each other. There would have been no pain.

In the months that followed I read and studied and learned and prayed. The prayers did it. Studying the new scriptures taught me a great deal - many things not mentioned in the Bible: the location of God, the nature of humanity before Adam, the possibilities of a peaceful human society and much else. But it was the prayers that made the difference.

After reading the prayers for an hour or so, my mind would be filled with answers, concepts, and knowledge that I'd not dreamed of before. The information would crowd into my consciousness like fireworks exploding on a starry night. Concepts would rush over me, one after another, unordered and jumbled, but distinct and individual in their meaning and content. It took time to sort them out and some I could not retain. Sometimes they would overwhelm me so greatly I would pass out.

Where did these answers and information come from? I cannot say. Certainly I had not learned them while growing up, nor had any school studies provided them. I can only say they came from God; no other source seems plausible.

On the next visit to my family I mentioned going to the meetings and the prayers. My mother began screaming about fanatics and religious nuts, and the stupidity of people who could not do things for themselves. My father later quietly said, "If it makes sense to you, then I have no objection." I was so overwhelmed I could hardly nod. I wanted to hug him so much it hurt, but I didn't know how. Instead I turned and went to my car and drove away.

A few miles down the road the tears finally came: tears of rejection (again) and now, acceptance. Soon they came so hard I could not see. I stopped by the side of the road and wept. It felt like I cried forever, but finally my sobs diminished and I felt surprisingly calm - as if years of pain had been washed away.

I found the book of prayers on the seat beside me, opened it and read the words: "Thou didst separate light from fire, and truth from denial..." The rejection and acceptance were clear and evident. I did not need to wonder any more. I could see that my desire for a loving family was not to be realized, but I was content. At peace with myself and my past, I drove to my home to begin my own life.