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Published by Covenant Communications, Inc.
American Fork, Utah

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Printed in China
First Printing: October 2010

17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN-13 978-1-59811-603-8

LIFE LESSONS FROM

Fathers *of* Faith

INSPIRING TRUE STORIES ABOUT LATTER-DAY DADS

COMPILED BY

GARY W. TOYN & MICHAEL K. WINDER

My Father's Tattered Faith

by John Bennion

The day I learned my father drank alcohol, my friends and I were riding horses from Greenjacket, my father's ranch, to Vernon, where we all lived. One stretch of the ride turned into a race. Maggy, our little mustang, loved to run, and she often won. I let the reins loose, and she sprinted along the gravel road that rose and fell as it crossed ridges and ravines. Riding her when she ran full bore was like trying to stick to a bucking bronco, so my job was to keep my feet in the stirrups and hang on to the horn. I think we finished first, but I could be wrong. I do remember my father waiting for us at a sharp turn in the road, maybe to see if I would crack my foolish skull.

I pulled Maggie up, letting her know the race was over. My father shouted out the window of his pickup, "That's my hard-riding boy." His loud, affectionate call was seven ways embarrassing to me as my junior-high friends and I walked our horses, but his manner caught my attention. He was different than he had been just an hour before. Now he grinned, nearly crying, his voice unsteady with emotion. Most days he was quiet, drawn inward. His smile was crisp, wide, and quickly gone, and his wit was sharp, often satirical. He rarely hung his emotions out for public view and seemed ashamed of gush or maudlin displays. This time I understood what his slightly slurred speech, teary eyes, and sloppy grin meant: *He had been drinking.*

Discovering his secret felt traumatic and soon became the watershed event of my teenage years. Some ingrained sense that he could not bear my knowledge kept me from accusing him, but I ached for him to stop. If I could prevent his drinking once, I believed, and once more, once again, we could heal, becoming again like the people I imagined us to be—the happy circle of faces in our family photograph on my mother's dresser.

Hyperaware of him, I sensed his need for a drink as soon as he did. After working hard with him—moving cattle, building fences, or laying out pipes—he would say as we pulled up, "I'll be right in." In my gut I knew what would happen if he left my sight, so I dogged his steps as he fed the cow, messed with the water, completed one or another interminable and unnecessary task. I always finally gave up and walked back to the house. Half an hour later he joined us inside, lubricated, smiling, sloppy again, his edges blurred, a man not my father.

I always felt that if I could only be with him more, please him more, that he would stop drinking. Feeling responsible became my own addiction. I have trouble with authority, never trusting anyone over me to have as much sense as I do. I try to arrange my life so that I am in charge, so no one else can determine my destiny. The story and pattern of my life was laid down in those years.

Shame as well as respect for him made me continue to keep private what I thought was base sin. As the years passed, I could have no more raised the subject than I could have punched him in the face. Looking back, I recognize that probably most of the hundred and fifty people living in our small desert town also knew, but we all treasured this secret. Now I realize that his alcoholism and our injunction to silence were two parts of one disease. As I am now, he was depressive and no doubt drank to self-medicate. He was ill as a child, and as a teenager his friends brought him home after finding him drunk in the Vernon fields. When in Panama with the Army Air Corps, rather than spending time with his North American fellows, he hunted and drank with the Spanish-speaking locals. He told me once that he rode a bus with other soldiers who smiled at a dignified Panamanian man and his wife but mocked them in English. The soldiers thought that since they knew only a single language the same must be true of everyone. My father read the faces of the couple and knew they understood every word. His sensitivity was learned from his artist mother and visionary father, but also from his own sorrows, which made him open to the suffering of others. Instead of having only soldiers as friends, he wandered the jungle with those who knew that landscape. Once he rowed with a friend down a jungle stream. Rounding a bend, they came

His sensitivity was learned from his *artist* mother and *visionary* father, but also from his own *sorrows*, which made him open to **the suffering of others.**

EDUCATION

COLIN BENNION
is the father of

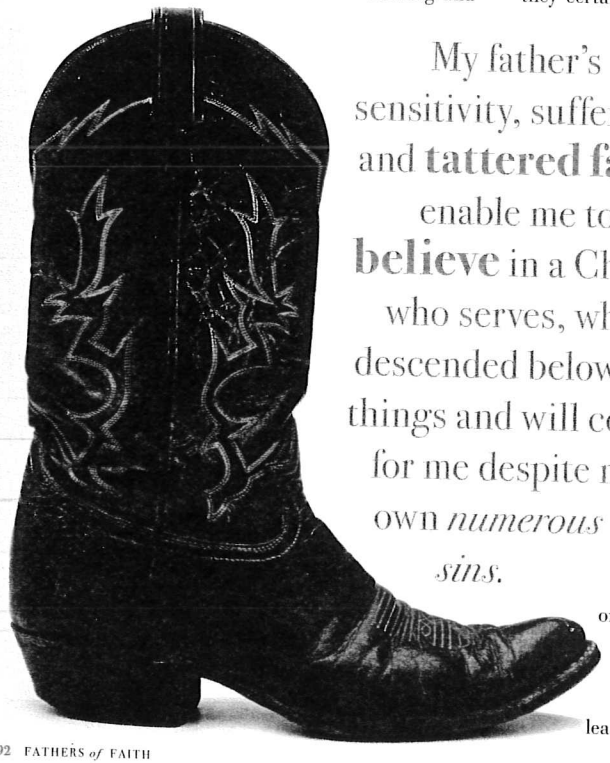
JOHN BENNION

John Bennion writes novels, essays, and short fiction about the western Utah desert and the people who inhabit that forbidding country. He has published a collection of short fiction, *Breeding Leah and Other Stories;* a novel, *Falling Toward Heaven;* and numerous other stories and short works. He received a bachelor's degree in English from Utah State University, a master's degree in English from BYU, and a PhD in literature and creative writing from the University of Houston. He is currently an associate professor at BYU, where he teaches creative writing and the British novel.

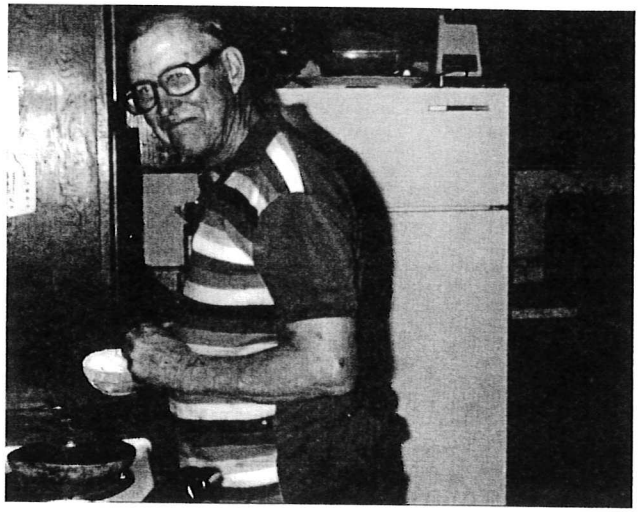
face-to-face with a naked Kuna in a canoe, who raised his hand, palm out, and greeted them with a cry like a bird. Later, my father and his brothers located each other as they hiked after cows in tall sagebrush by uttering that same strange cry. Was my father mocking or celebrating his brief contact with this aborigine? Knowing him, I judge it was both.

Now when I walk across the ranch at Greenjacket, I often find one of the green bottles that once held the cooking sherry he drank. My main emotion is regret that we didn't talk more, that I left him alone with his trouble. I have learned from reading and watching others how pernicious his addiction must have been. Hopefully growing beyond my adolescent embarrassment, I now try to understand his shame before family and Church members. Since his death twenty-four years ago, the absolute injunction to silence in our family has dissolved, and I just miss him.

What did he leave me? Maybe because he saw himself as one of the unworthy fringe, he was friends with everyone in town, Jack-Mormon and active alike. The Churchgoers fellowshipped each other every week at meetings, dinners, and celebrations; they certainly thought they were the only game in town. But through my father I knew that the other half didn't really feel the loss. The bishop asked him to visit Wild Bill Jones, the owner of the bar five miles outside town. Our visits were so natural that the irony of this assignment didn't hit me until a couple of years ago. It was fun to sit at the bar drinking a soda while my father joked with Wild Bill. He also made friends with the Mexican family that lived out on the rail line, and he worked with ranchers who drank coffee in the Silver Sage Inn on the highway above town. I learned through him that those



My father's sensitivity, suffering, and **tattered faith** enable me to **believe** in a Christ who serves, who descended below all things and will come for me despite my own *numerous sins.*



Colin Bennion treated everyone with equal respect.

who were not in church on Sunday had rich lives as well. He taught me to believe instinctively an idea I studied decades later reading George Eliot's great novel *Middlemarch*—that every person has an "equivalent centre of self, whence the lights and the shadows must always fall with a certain difference." In my father's mind no man or woman was despised. His worst slight of anyone was occasional sarcasm directed at some pious member of the Church who treasured only his own membership in the kingdom.

Later in his life my father said, as we drove through the canyon above Greenjacket, that he identified with what the writer Paul Bailey said about his faith being like Joseph's many-colored coat after his brothers tore it and rubbed dirt and blood into it. My father told me that his faith might be tattered, but it was his. "At the last, I believe my Savior will descend to save me." He talked many times about the adventure of passing through the celestial gate with his cattle, driving them into the eternities. He was fiercely loyal to my mother and to us children. He gave us pride in our own family, applying the term *viva la raza* to the Bennions, so that I thought he had invented that revolutionary phrase.

My father's faith and his open nature were manifested in the way he led me and my sisters, the Scouts and elementary students he taught, and the people who worked for him. Once when we were driving cattle westward from Vernon into the desert where they would spend the winter, he taught me his ethics of leadership. We had been sleeted and now snowed upon, but the cattle were finally bedded down in a patch of greasewood. Our bedroll was a couple of sleeping bags under a canvas tarp in the back of the truck. I wanted to crawl in and try to get warm, but he said, "A rancher first takes care of the cattle, then the horses, then the hands, and last of all himself." We walked through the herd, gave the horse some grain, and finally I could pry off my sodden boots, slither out of my frozen-stiff trousers. My father's sensitivity, suffering, and tattered faith enable me to believe in a Christ who serves, who descended below all things and will come for me despite my own numerous sins.