

PLANS AND PROVIDENCE



JANUARY ALWAYS AWAKENS A DESIRE FOR self-improvement. The tracks and gyms are crowded, and the bookstore sells day planners like hot cakes. Ben Franklin, a January-born baby, may rightfully be regarded as the month's patron saint. He is the original guru of self-perfection by systematic planning. Franklin figured if he worked on one virtue a week, rotating through thirteen virtues quarterly, he could eventually master them all. January conjures up in us Franklin's Yankee optimism that we can organize ourselves into perfection through planning and willpower.

Unfortunately—or sometimes fortunately—unplanned contingencies disrupt “the best laid plans of mice and men,” to quote Burns,⁵ another January baby. We are living through one such unforeseen financial convulsion. The current crisis, which caught planners everywhere by surprise, brings to mind a passage in the Epistle of James. “Go to now,” James admonished the businessmen of his day, “Ye that say, To day or to morrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain: whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow.... For that ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that” (James 4: 13–15).

James reminds us that at any moment God's plans for us can interrupt our plans for ourselves. Our lives are laced with uncertainty, whether we realize it or not. Our plans are subject to the vagaries of fortune—and the intentionality of heaven.

My career, like yours, has been full of interruptions to the plan. In fact, every administrative assignment, like every Church calling, has been unplanned for. Like you, I have often had to adjust my fond designs to unfolding circumstances. Puritans understood this need to balance planning with providence. They memorialized it in the motto “Trust in the Lord, but keep your powder dry.”⁶

Wise planning must accommodate contingency. Life requires firmness and flex. In a recent college visit, I was impressed with a chemistry professor’s efforts to program “flex time” into her new PDA. She builds in unannounced office hours so that she can be available to respond to the unplanned exigencies of her many chemistry students.

Perhaps as a mother this professor has been better schooled than most in the need for flex time. It’s no coincidence that strategic planning comes out of male-dominated corporate culture. Families operate under more fluid dynamics than do firms. Children get sick, have emotional crises, and are born on their own schedules. My wife was born in mid-January, but she was due before Christmas. This meant many long weeks of her mother trusting in the Lord but keeping the baby powder dry.

The concept of flex time has theological implications. We must live our lives deliberately, according to fixed principles and firm plans for achieving righteous goals and resolutions. Yet our schedules also need to be open to interruption by celestial contingencies. In our hurried journeys to Jericho, we are sometimes called upon to respond to the wounded stranger, resulting in divine detours and delays.

Jesus understood this well. He flexed in response to the needs of others, most notably in 3 Nephi. Having announced that he had important appointments to keep with the Father and with the lost tribes, the people begged him to linger. He may have felt the tug of a child on his sleeve. He certainly felt the tug of the multitude’s tears in his heart, and he changed his plans:

But now I go unto the Father, and also to show myself unto the lost tribes of Israel, for they are not lost unto the Father....

And it came to pass that when Jesus had thus spoken, he cast his eyes round about again on the multitude, and beheld they were in tears, and did look steadfastly upon him as if they would ask him to tarry a little longer with them.

And he said unto them: Behold, my bowels are filled with compassion towards you. (3 Nephi 17:4-6)

One of the greatest spiritual outpourings in history was an interruption to plan.

It's difficult to know when to be firm and when to flex. If, however, we are to live both intentionally and according to the intentions of heaven, we must learn how to balance our plans with promptings from providence.